

CHAPTER 5

Feeling exposed: Facilitating the online learning community (OLC)

5.1 Introduction

Online technologies change daily, and the understanding of how learning can be facilitated and enhanced with these technologies is in its infancy. Sometimes the expectations ‘are paramount to herding cats through Picadilly Circus’ (Cox et al.). The online teacher enters a different reality that demands additional responsibilities, especially when compared with print delivery at Unisa. It is almost as if he or she enters the unknown with limited capacity - the spirit of an explorer and risk taker must reside within the facilitator who is to guide learners through this new landscape. Regarding the role of the teacher, Stacey (1998, p. 26) makes the following statement: ‘This type of thinking enables a paradigmatic shift as the teacher is removed from the centre of the learning process and the learners become actively engaged in their own learning.’

Using traditional teaching and support approaches may be problematic, and a new teaching perspective, accompanied by a whole new range of skills, may be required for the dynamics of the online learning community. In order to be successful, teaching staff will be required to critically assess their current teaching practice, retain appropriate practice and acquire new skills that will enable them to cope with the new learning environment. This chapter will provide an overview of the new teaching responsibilities. It will be informed by the experience on the sample course.

5.2 Maintaining a socio-technical system

The online learning community is a social environment enabled by Internet communication technologies — it is socio-technical. It is sustained by a

complex set of responsibilities which may not be generic to all delivery modes. According to Paloff and Pratt (1999, p. 73) the tasks of the teacher relate to four areas:

- Social (establishing a social environment to facilitate collaborative work)
- Pedagogical (teaching)
- Managerial (course administration)
- Technical (maintaining the technical infrastructure)

In terms of a holistic understanding of the OLC as a socio-technical environment towards proper support and facilitation, it was expected that the sample course delivery would be problematic. These categories and responsibilities promised to be far more intense than the print responsibilities associated with print delivery as they were intended to bring the facilitator much closer to the learners' needs. The facilitator's basic teaching responsibilities (merging the social and pedagogical responsibilities) can be summarised as follows:

- Familiarising participants with the course environment from a technical and learning point of departure;
- Establishing and maintaining a warm and caring social environment;
- The organization of constructive discussions, the stimulating of online discourse and the shaping of the space (in a complex structure people have difficulty working out where to send messages and the total volume of messages may become a problem);
- Arrangement of threads and summaries, and the successful use of techniques like weaving (similar or linked messages or threads have to be drawn together either by learners or tutor thereby making associations between ideas and information thus building learning – avoiding fragmentation and compartmentalization) and summarizing;
- Sharing resources;

- Challenging by questioning in order to promote knowledge construction (avoiding single replies and short comments in discussions).

These responsibilities and roles will be addressed in this section as they relate to the course sequence and the learning experience.

5.2.1 The facilitator

During the course of the pilot deliveries it became evident that being an online teacher or facilitator required a very committed person who could enable community and knowledge construction, and who could manage the socio-technical environment of the course.

Who should facilitate?

Contrary to what novices to the online learning scenario might think, successful courses depend much more on human interaction than on technological infrastructure (Horton, 2000: 397). The facilitator has to be a responsive and compassionate person who takes care of the needs of all participants. Learners are not present physically and the facilitator has to read their state of mind and emotions from what they write or don't, and how often they participate. They can only communicate through the media and technologies available. Within the community, learners can also rely more on their class mates than on the facilitator, as the online facilitator is only another group member and part of a horizontal structure. Maintaining a welcoming and warm atmosphere will certainly demand a person with the right attitude. Diana (interview, 13/11/2001) experienced the facilitator, Rian, as emotionally not part of the group. According to her his heart was not in the effort.

Conversational style and tone

Learners also provided feedback on the conversational style and tone that they desired and felt comfortable with. One of the past learners, Vasi, was asked to host some discussions as the second facilitator. She is a very social and conversational person and it was expected that she would do well in hosting and facilitating the discussions (research journal, 5/9/2001). Shane (interview, 15/11/01) compared the two facilitators. Rian appeared to be a stereotypical professor while Vasi appeared to be a compassionate person who slept, ate and drank the issues on this course. For Mary (interview, 15/11/01) the facilitator was a bit quiet and he did not react to her social introduction in the Student Café. She thought him to be a serious person. His comments in general were good, but he wasn't as 'bubbly' as Vasi.

With this course delivery the facilitator did attempt to enhance the social atmosphere by trying to maintain a conversational style. He attempted to mediate between an academic tone and a more relaxed style. He was of the opinion that the style and tone of writing should also serve as a model to learners. According to him, Vasi, the second facilitator, who was a previous learner on the course, and who facilitated two course forums during the second delivery of the course, was one such example. Her closing message in the last forum contained too many personal things which he did not deem appropriate. She also sent around pictures of King Kong on the Twin Towers (World Trade Centre) just after 11 September 2001. For him this was questionable. One would expect better behaviour in front of the learners. Everything she did was very positive, but she had to be more professional (personal interview, 28/11/2001).

5.2.2 Gaining access to the system

Online course environments differ from context to context and very often from course to course. Even though learners may have sufficient experience with the

technologies, they may struggle to find their way in a new course environment. It is essential that they be introduced to the structure and technical procedures required as soon as possible.

Orientation

With proper instruction, facilitators and learners should acquire enough knowledge about Internet communication technologies to, with proper instructions, gain access to the course environment and successfully navigate through this environment. It is therefore part of the facilitator's responsibility, right at the start, to make sure that learners understand the structure of the course and that they know their way around. It is useful to add an orientation section at the start of the course. Through this section learners are familiarized with the content, the technologies and the activities that are required.

The sample course did contain an orientation section to assist learners to familiarize themselves with the technologies and the structure of the course. In addition sufficient experience of Internet communication technologies was a requirement for entry to this course. Learners experienced problems with the chatroom and browser settings, and also with using the Internet to find resources. These problems were addressed by the course coordinator, but would normally be the responsibility of the facilitator. Some training opportunities were also provided in the 'Skills' section of the E-library. The facilitator should also be able to assist and direct learners to reach all help and training that is provided.

Schedule and structure

Learners have to receive a comprehensive syllabus, schedule and other information that would successfully guide and structure course activities. In addition course content should be presented in manageable chunks in the online environment. Hundreds of pages of text or overly long lecture-sized

deliveries are not recommended for on-screen perusal and may demotivate instead of stimulate. Exact dates have to be specified and cross-references are to be provided by linking all directions, information and activities that are relevant to one another. Important items or milestones in the course delivery should be indicated prominently in the course schedule and contents structure.

The sample course did provide a proper schedule which assisted learners to plan and manage their workload, and the course content was easy to navigate. Learners were encouraged to familiarize themselves with this environment right from the start.

5.2.3 Enabling communication and community

To make the OLC successful, facilitators have to enable a warm social atmosphere in which learners can feel free to communicate. Feeling part of the group is essential for sharing of ideas and collaborative work.

Social responsibilities

The online learning community can be seen as a learning ‘paradise’ in distance education practice. It provides opportunities and qualities that are not available or that are difficult to replicate in a correspondence learning environment. Learners and facilitators are brought closer together with the help of communication technology. Such ‘closeness’ in a learning environment is important for learning to be successful. According to Bulach, Brown and Potter (1998, p. 442) learners cannot be taught, nor can learning be fostered, until they are convinced the teacher cares about them – learners have a human need to feel cared about. Galegher, Sproull and Kiesler (1998, p. 496) report that reactions to stressful life-events have shown that when people face uncertainty, stress, and pain, they tend to seek and benefit from opportunities to share their feelings with others. This includes having feelings for others, having relationships, and demonstrating values of kindness, respect and faithfulness,

sincerity, attentiveness, and tolerance. They also benefit from having work explained, encouraging one another to improve, receiving help with personal problems, being given and feeling that others have gone the extra mile.

The OLC therefore has a very strong social component in that the teachers are responsible for the promotion of a friendly social environment and community building. Promoting human relationships, affirming and recognizing learners' input, providing opportunities for learners to develop a sense of group cohesiveness, maintaining the group as a unit, and helping learners to work together towards mutual goals are important responsibilities (Palof and Pratt, 1999: 76).

The facilitator was aware that the sense of community was important in order to support collaborative work. He prepared in advance to support a sense of community on the course. Even without the supporting discussions before the start of the course he had devised strategies to cope with his duties and how to handle the learners: 'I will supply the learners with all kinds of advice right from the start. I have noticed in other learner groups that they can help one another quite efficiently' (research journal, 2/2/2001). This initiative was supported by his experience of the first training workshop. He mentioned that he had gathered from the literature that the sense of community was strongly connected to a strong group spirit. Evidence from print-based Masters candidates pointed toward them having pulled through because of peer support and encouragement (research journal, 8/2/01). Learners reported positively to being part of the group and making friends (discussed in Chapter 4). For example, support staff received a request from Diana to not let the group dissolve without proper greetings – this was evidence of the strength of the community spirit. Support staff decided to send out the following message:

Hi all

We are almost at the end of this course – I have posted some remarks in this regard in the Student Café – please respond in this forum. We cannot end this course in an abrupt way without concluding things and saying goodbye in a proper way!

Cheers

Japie

Establishing group presence as early as possible

Horton (2000, p. 406) advises prospective facilitators to ‘teach the class and not to just let it happen’. The facilitator should actively lead the class, motivating learners to take part and helping them to overcome problems. It may sometimes be necessary to let individual participants know that they are viewed as unique and that there is a willingness to listen to their concerns. Encouragement and warmth in the online learning environment can be facilitated by the use of special language (Lewis in White 2000, p. 33). The use of emoticons (“smileys”) can also add humour to messages. Each participant should be sent a message welcoming him to the class. Encouraging learners to post their biographies in a special place will help them to know one another better and they will be able to look for and cooperate with classmates with similar interests. Learners want reaction on their introductions as they want to feel recognized after they have shared something of themselves. This is essential for participation later in the course. If there is no reaction they can feel hurt and disappear for some time (Palloff and Pratt, 1999: 114).

The Student Café was introduced as a social space for learners, and as a first exercise in using the discussion software. Learners on the sample course appreciated the Student Café as they got to know their fellow learners. Support staff also introduced themselves in this space and welcomed learners. For Diana (interview, 13/11/2001) the Student Café (open throughout the delivery period) was a place where she could keep up social contact with the group when she had to work on her own. Learners indicated that they felt part of the group and appreciated the fact that they knew that they were not alone in their struggle to extend their knowledge (discussed in Chapter 4).

Structuring the conversation

An important role of the tutor is to support the intellectual framework of the course and to encourage learning and knowledge building. In this regard Tsui (2001) points out that the online community requires attention to group organisation, group dynamics and educational leadership. But Guglielmo (1998, p. 36) is dissatisfied with the little attention that has been paid to the practical problems of organising and structuring mediated communication for learning purposes. He recommends that two issues be addressed when designing online courses: educational design and the architecture of the communication system necessary for the design's implementation. In the case of CMC this means focusing on systems that invite and sustain message submissions (Warren and Rada 1998, p. 71). Any course must be examined in the light of the influences brought to bear by the communication technology. After initial definition of tasks and activities the focus shifts to the logical organisation of the communication. The more easily environments can be structured to meet communication needs, the more enjoyable and trouble-free participation in the online course will be. To assure successful productive online communication, course designers need to provide a procedure for discourse that users can understand and follow.

The organisation and management of the communication structure is extremely important and Guglielmo (1998, p. 39) recommends:

- Structuring of topics into conferences and sub conferences;
- Management of links between messages belonging to the same conference (excessive fragmentation is otherwise possible and nobody will know where to insert a message);
- Respecting the integrity of conferences.

Structuring the communication environment

Support was provided in the form of a Student Café, Announcements Forum, Feedback Forum and Technical Forum. A chatroom was added as an optional facility providing learners with the opportunity to experiment with this synchronous technology. An e-library providing access to online resources and training in Internet research skills was developed and added to the course environment. An e-counsellor was trained to assist learners with problems in the distance education and the online learning environment. Knowledge construction was facilitated in six course forums including four discussions, one brainstorming session and one presentation area for collaborative work. Learners were continuously assessed in terms of online participation, group work and three essay assignments (no venue-linked examination was scheduled). Learners were also supported individually through e-mail communication.

Group size

For this task to succeed fully different ratios of facilitator to learners are suggested by different authors: 1 to 30 (Horton 2000), 1 to 25 (Harasim 1995), 1 to 13 (White et al 2000) and less than 1 to 15 (Palof and Pratt 1999). Horton (2000, p. 397) mentions that the Fielding Institute in Santa Barbara chooses to maintain a 1 to 8 ratio of learners to faculty in electronic seminars. Larger class sizes may force the facilitator to divide one class in to several smaller groups for collaborative learning. It follows that classes of hundreds or thousands are impossible to facilitate unless a corresponding number of facilitators is available. It is with this standard in mind, and the fact that the sample course was a pilot implementation, that group size was limited to 10 learners.

Working in groups and playing roles

Group work was preceded by a brainstorming and discussion session. These activities were added to help learners identify suitable topics for the presentations. Learners were grouped into two groups of five to prepare, present and host a topic of their choice. In the small groups, learners had to identify an issue that they saw as important, do research on this issue, and present their argument as a group to the rest of the learning community. They had to make use of all the available resources, and fresh innovative contributions were highly valued. Learners were free to use any form of communication to prepare this presentation. If they felt they needed their own private forum for this purpose, they had to inform the course coordinator. Each group member had a specific role to fulfil - the responsibilities of presenter, moderator and summariser were assigned by the course facilitator.

Ensuring team performance

Warren and Rada (1998, p. 72) highlight important requirements and responsibilities of the different stakeholders in the online learning community:

- They must begin contributing to learning immediately at the start of the virtual course.
- The facilitator must be involved as facilitator, encourager, structure provider and resource.
- Interaction must be required, structured and graded.
- Participants must be mature motivated learners.
- They must also share an interest and commitment to a well-defined task.
- Have ease of access to a reliable computer network.
- Feel a sense of responsibility to the group, task or both.
- Experience strong leadership and anticipate a final evaluation of the group task.

On the sample course learners were required to start communicating in the Student Café right from the start as part of their orientation. Their interaction was structured (see the section above on *Structuring the communication environment*) into different functional course forums related to the content. Participation was compulsory as 20% of their final mark was allocated towards continuous quality participation. A group presentation was prepared by two smaller groups (see *Working in groups and playing roles* above). The two strongest learners were assigned the roles of coordinators of the presentations (see Diana's strong leadership role in this task, as discussed in Chapter 4).

Structuring team performance

Collaborative and team activities should be well managed in order to avoid frustration on both sides. The following are some valuable hints (adapted from Horton 2000, p. 406; Palof and Pratt 1999, p. 115):

- Publish written instructions a week before the activity.
- Motivate learners.
- Encourage learners to get to know one another.
- Divide learners into teams well in advance, or encourage them to form teams.
- Give the team definite goals, expectations and deadlines.
- Make sure someone initially assumes leadership of the team as learners can take over the leadership role.
- Allocate adequate time for completion.
- Make learners aware of differences in time zones as responses may come 'later' than expected.
- All learners can be assigned a role within group activities. Suggest rules or procedures for conducting team activities, reaching consensus, and setting disputes.

- Note which learners do not participate in live collaborative activities, and make a point of calling on them by name during the next live event.
- Make use of peer evaluation where one group evaluates another's work according to agreed upon criteria.

Learners on the sample course were supplied with a course schedule addressing all the activities that they had to perform. Notices were also sent out warning them of deadlines looming or discussions that were to start on specific dates.

The following is an example of a notification that went out via e-mail:

Hi all

The Brainstorming Session will be from 17 September to 30 September. You are required to post ideas and to discuss them – information and ideas from these discussions can help you with selecting and researching a topic for your group presentations.

We have acquired the services of an external host and second facilitator for the duration of the Brainstorming Session. She will be Vasi Nadoo (she has a strong background in HCD). Her introduction and invitation to take part in the Session should reach you shortly.

In the meanwhile you will be working on the Assignment – remember that you can send in drafts to Rian for comments before the due date.

Best wishes

Japie

Technical issues were addressed in the technical forum and e-mails were sent out (eg the problems with the chatroom at the beginning of each delivery). For the groupwork, learners were divided into smaller groups with the stronger learners appointed as coordinators. The roles of summariser, moderator, presenter, and coordinator were also assigned. The group that was not presenting at a specific time, was required to provide critique and comments on the argument present by the other group. To assure appropriate behaviour, the group was provided with netiquette rules which contained the following headings:

- Remember the human aspect;
- Adhere to real life standards;
- Know where you are in cyberspace;
- Make quality contributions in public;
- Share knowledge;
- Keep flaming under control;
- Be forgiving of other people's mistakes.

An online code of conduct was provided, including reference to the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and the Internet Policy of Unisa.

5.2.4 Supporting learners

The OLC can be a very intense and overwhelming environment for Unisa's 'print-based learners' (as discussed in Chapter 4). It is therefore essential that there are definite steps to stimulate participation and to motivate learners.

Motivating learners

Online learning demands high levels of motivation, and learners cannot bring all the motivation with them (Horton 2000, p. 417). Facilitators should aim at motivating participants right from the start and should attempt to prompt input. There will always be technical hurdles and social interaction that is uncertain in the course. Facilitators should take care to provoke interest, use motivating words, and vary content and presentation to prevent learners from becoming bored or frustrated. According to Horton (2000, p. 417) unmotivated learners can be identified from:

- Late submission of assignments;
- Unanswered messages;
- Terse, sarcastic, or flippant responses;

- Negative comments about the course, instructor, or other learners;
- Negative comments by other learners;
- Sudden reduction in test scores;
- Failure to submit optional assignments.

Unmotivated learners should immediately be contacted in private and they should be motivated to continue. Should there be problems with the group's dynamics, this should also receive attention.

On the pilot course the non-contributors were a problem. Zeta (interview, 16/11/2001) and Gay (interview, 14/11/2001) were both intimidated by the two very strong learners who were extremely visible and contributed very strongly. As a result they did not take part until very late in the course. Gwen mentioned that she felt 'robbed' of the experience that some of the 'lurkers' did not share with her (interview, 23/06/2001). Diana felt that some learners took a 'free ride' by not sharing their ideas with the group (interview, 13/11/2001).

Establishing a strong sense of community in order for participants to benefit from one another was a very strong objective in the pilot course as OLC. For Zeta (interview, 16/11/01) the overall support on the course was tremendous. The staff formed the external boundaries of the group as they could help learners to get back on track or to assist them to do things differently. Zeta thought that Vasi's guidance was very good and that at no stage during the course did she feel her contribution was not valuable. This motivated Zeta to do more. From the support staff's point of view Zeta was not very strong at the beginning and they decided to send her an e-mail:

Hi Zeta

I haven't seen you in the Student Café. I hope there isn't anything wrong. Please let us know.

Japie

Zeta did respond later and informed the support staff that she had been overwhelmed by work commitments. Vasi, the second facilitator and external host, motivated learners to participate, but did not intervene too often when the discussions were going well. This strategy is evident in the following message received from her:

Hi Japie

Thanx for this info... I was planning on doing so but wanted to ask you first... but you beat me to that I see (smile). My strategy was not to intervene as the group needs to find itself and take a stance on elaborating their various viewpoints. I must say I am glad everybody is participating as I sent a message strongly urging participation and collaboration in this forum. It's been an amazing experience to me so far.

Will do the summaries on Monday...

I am doing well on this end.

Vasie

Stimulating participation

An important function of the facilitator on the sample course was to stimulate participation and debate in the discussions. Arney (interview, 20/11/2001) was of the opinion that the facilitator did not perform well. He thought that a facilitator should say things to keep the conversation going and challenge the learners sufficiently; however his contributions were small. According to Gwen (interview, 23/06/2001) learners have to take part otherwise they deny the rest of the group their valuable experience and contributions. For her quiet people on the course were a problem. She did not know what they were thinking. Proper facilitation should address these people, because 'those who don't take part rob us of their input – we need everybody's input for a fruitful experience'. Gay (14/11/2001) was of the opinion that more feedback on individual contributions would stimulate participation.

However, there were two learners dominating course activities during the second delivery. Mary (interview, 15/11/2001) and Gay (14/11/2001) were

intimidated by these learners. They did not have the confidence to express themselves. It could be suggested that the facilitator should take care that one or two learners do not dominate discussions to the point that others do not participate. Arney (interview, 20/11/2001) saw fellow learners gaining confidence to communicate. He saw learners grow and become empowered to make their mark – Elaine was not that confident in the beginning, but later on she made impressive contributions. Vanessa (interview, 23/06/2001) felt that the stronger learners helped with facilitation and they kept the group together.

Some learners wanted a bigger group of learners as they did not feel challenged sufficiently. They were of the opinion that there were too few strong participants while they felt the rest were only there for an easy ride (interview with Diana, 13/11/2001).

Arney (interview, 20/11/2001) learned a lot about the dynamics of online groups. He was a lecturer himself and wanted to be on such a course to learn how the dynamics of online groups worked — what lead to a good response and what not. When messages were overly theoretic there wasn't a good reaction. He generated many ideas and principles that he intended to use to enhance the conversation and initiatives of people in the online community.

All forums were scheduled for a limit of two weeks. The facilitator felt that they should be shorter, that the learners should have had to react earlier and that topics and scope should have been limited to make the forums less 'clogged'. In the second delivery there were 13 messages delivered per learner every two weeks. This was a message per learner almost every day. This intensity of communication seemed to him to be high. To him the debates tended to be too long and learners went off on a tangent. He suggested that each thread should be a forum and should have a strong focus. When the threads were too long it was difficult to follow. Shorter forums could be scheduled very tightly and learners could be penalized for not contributing on schedule.

In general he found his responsibilities overwhelming. He had to contribute everywhere, everything seemed to be happening at the same time and he found this confusing (personal interview, 28/11/2001). The reaction of the facilitator could be evidence of an attitude that had resulted from loosely scheduled responsibilities that were not usually very intense and demanding in nature. Print-based lecturers can find a change from this reality a very challenging and daunting task.

Contrary to Arney's opinion Alex and Neville (interviews, 19/11/01 and 23/6/01) thought that the facilitator had provided support when the group needed it. The facilitator was less involved when the learners were doing well in the forums. All three key support staff performed well, and they did not experience any communication or support problems. They also received sufficient feedback on their assignments. For Neville the distance was reduced by the quality of the support. The facilitator, coordinator and counsellor were available at the click of a button and this made him feel more comfortable.

But providing proper support should also be about being sensitive towards the needs of struggling learners. For Esther (interview, 23/06/01) this learning experience was extremely intense. The workload was heavy. She found it very difficult to adapt and would have appreciated more help in this regard. In addition to this sometimes during the course some learners were de-motivated due to what they perceived as inequality in treatment. Gwen (interview, 23/06/01) wanted the facilitator to support everybody equally. When one learner was singled out and commended for good work online ('Well done...'), she felt she could no longer criticize or question this learner's opinions.

Visibility

The facilitator should be visible in the online course environment in order to establish a supportive atmosphere and to increase access. Anita Bischoff (in

White 2000, p 60) sees visibility as crucial in facilitating an online course successfully. Public messaging and posting replies on learner comments are important to the perception of an instructor's presence. Personal correspondence via e-mail does not help much in this regard. The facilitator must model the behaviour that is demanded within an online learning community. If learners are required to at least post three or four times per week then the instructor must at least do the same. Such an example may motivate learners to participate. In a correspondence environment learners often experience a strong sense of isolation. This can be reduced in the online environment when learners log on and see the instructor being active in the forums.

On the sample course the facilitator was not very visible in the first forum of the second delivery. Although he did open the first forum of the first delivery, he did not 'show his face' for the next six days. This did not meet standard requirements and the coordinator expected the learners to experience a breakdown in communication (research journal, 26/8/2001) as a result. Jenny (interview, 14/11/2001), Neville (interview, 23/6/2001), and Vanessa (interview, 23/06/2001) saw the facilitator as being silent and they were of the opinion that he never got properly involved. Vasi, the second facilitator, was very visible and involved according to Vanessa. Gwen (interview, 23/06/2001) missed the facilitator and recommended that he should not be able to leave the group and go away for a long time (he had attended a conference during his online duties and was not very visible for some time). Esther did not know who the facilitator was (interview, 23/06/2001). To her the facilitator only reminded them about the assignments and showed his face in the discussions. But then she had to add that more support would probably not have made a difference because the activities were too dense for her. Lea (interview, 23/06/2001) had a deeper understanding of the difficult role of the facilitator. For her he did not perform his task up to standard, but she did not have greater expectations because she knew this was a new environment for him. Diana (interview, 13/11/2001) saw the facilitator as emotionally absent. For her he was not active

enough and did not put much into his role. He was not present in the discussions and arguments the learners had. He was not emotionally part of the group and his heart was not in the effort.

It is possible that external discussion hosts do not understand exactly what their duties are and how committed they have to be. The external host of the second forum was criticized by a learner for not being visible (interview with Vanessa, 23/06/2001). According to her the external host was not visible enough because he had gone away on an overseas visit during his discussion slot. She thought that if somebody committed to hosting or teaching online, he should not stay disconnected for long periods.

Feedback

Within the online learning community it is not only facilitator feedback that is important, but learners must also provide constructive and extensive feedback to each other. For Palloff and Pratt (1999, p. 123) this should be a prerequisite as it is not a naturally acquired skill. To help others think about what they have produced, giving feedback must be taught, modeled and encouraged by the instructor. Expectations and guidelines in this regard must be posted up front and refined with learner input (see *Structuring the conversation* in the previous section).

The second delivery included a mastery assignment that made proper feedback on assignment work much more important. Elaine (13/11/01) received insufficient feedback on her assignments for mastery to take place. She valued the criteria for the assignments, and had a good idea of what was expected. However, she was however not satisfied with the feedback on the first assignment for mastery – she had received only a few words back: ‘the assignment is fine, put more theory in the beginning’. She expected more substantial feedback.

Communication failure

Within the confinement of the online classroom, people may write what they aren't actually thinking, or they may say things because there is enough distance and anonymity between them and the next person. Frustration, controversy and confusion can be very much part of such an environment. White (2000, p. 142) stresses the need for the facilitator to respond effectively in online conflict situations. Online facilitators will have to be able to identify abuse of opportunity and misbehaviour against a background of proper skills, facilities and support. To respond effectively before the learning experience as a whole 'turns sour' is very important. At the beginning of the course learners should be made aware of the limits that qualify the nature and extent of any possible conflict. They should be aware that there is support available at all times and that they shouldn't be afraid to participate for fear of generating or getting involved in conflict (see *Structuring team performance* above where netiquette was discussed).

There were two learners who dominated course activities during the second delivery. Mary (interview, 15/11/2001) and Gay (14/11/2001) were intimidated by these learners. They did not have the confidence to express themselves. The facilitator should have taken care that one or two learners did not dominate discussions to the point that others did not participate. Arney (interview, 20/11/2001) saw fellow learners gaining confidence to communicate. He saw learners grow and become empowered to make their mark. Elaine was not that confident in the beginning, but later on she made impressive contributions. Vanessa (interview, 23/06/2001) felt that the stronger learners helped with facilitation and they kept the group together. Some learners wanted a bigger group of learners as they did not feel challenged sufficiently. They were of the opinion that there were too few strong participants while the rest were only there for an 'easy ride' (interview with Diana, 13/11/2001).

5.2.5 Facilitating knowledge construction

The OLC provides a unique opportunity for learners to collaboratively increase their knowledge about a specific topic. But such an advantage should be based on the principles of sharing and collaboration which, in turn, should be facilitated properly.

Sharing ideas, knowledge and responsibilities

The course content was considered part of the background towards constructive discussion on the sample course. The course structure and the organization of content and resources (which was part of the original design) aided learners sufficiently towards finding applicable resources. Discussions were often very intensive and learners sometimes had little time to do searches to find exact and specific resources.

As part of an initial course activity, learners were asked to explore the course topics and related resources, to search online library services and to share any links they came across. The contracting of an external host enriched the sample course with their experience. According to the facilitator learners were exposed to more ideas and communication styles (interview, 28/11/2001). Learners were also able to share their experience and knowledge with one another (see Chapter 4). Learners had to gain confidence and develop as knowledge builders themselves. But it was the responsibility of the facilitator to assist learners to grow in the community to a level where they could participate fully and share their realizations and insights.

Active learning is a strong requirement for adult learning. One way in which active participation was ensured on the sample course, was through the sharing of responsibility for facilitation. Learners were assigned responsibility for performing roles in the group presentations. The facilitator was prepared to

stand back and to let learners perform his duties in terms of coordinating and overseeing activities, and moderating and summarising activities.

Moderating discussions

The facilitator can use different techniques to make a discussion or conversation more successful in order to support quality learning in the online environment. For the sample course the use of asynchronous technologies was supported. This allowed participants to contribute whenever they were ready, but within a particular time frame. The asynchronous nature of the technology allowed for reflection and composition of proper responses, thereby supporting a high quality of contributions. According to Palloff and Pratt (1999, p. 119) guidelines should accompany all activities, and guidelines for certain group responsibilities and activities should be negotiated. Questions posed in the online environment need to initiate a discussion promoting exploration of a topic and the development of critical thinking skills. They are the building blocks of dialogue and participation, and the right question at the right time can stimulate thinking and activity.

At the start of the first delivery, a strategy was discussed regarding how to deal with the many contributions on the first course forum. The facilitator would react to them individually, wait for follow-up messages and then respond once more in the same way (research journal, 9/2/2001). For the assistant facilitator, who was also a former learner, the second semester's group of learners was challenging. She came to realize that one should not prod learners all the time. Learners should be the main contributors to the debates and discussions as they will get more from the course (interview with Vasi, 22/11/2001). The moderation or facilitation of discussions, however, remained a problem throughout the two deliveries of the sample course. Vanessa (interview, 23/06/2001) and Gay (interview, 14/11/2001) wanted more focus in the discussions. For Vanessa it seemed as if 'participants just went on talking and talking... Some form of intervention would have been nice... to know that the

arguments lead somewhere and to be focused.’ Redirecting discussions may be crucial to the successful development of the arguments. Initially, therefore, the facilitator will have to hold back and then will have to redirect in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere. At one stage in the course threads were redirected as some learners became belligerent and contributions tended to get personal. Participants were then redirected the facilitator (interviews with Jolene, 23/06/01, Elaine, 13/11/01, and Alex, 19/11/01). One learner notified the course coordinator via e-mail that she was glad the facilitator had refocused the discussions to theory and industrial psychology. For her it was too much about current affairs (research journal, 3/9/2001).

Nomsa (interview, 23/06/01) perceived the role of the facilitator as being more active than it was — ‘more pointers, and a more active role to direct discussions would be appreciated.’ The discussion forums tended to generate a lot of information. According to Esther (interview, 23/06/01) learners should be required to keep contributions shorter. Some learners’ messages were far too long. She got bored with these long messages. However, others did keep to the subject. It sometimes felt like a battleground, but she enjoyed it ‘as this kind of thing is not possible in print.’

Threaded discussions

Threaded discussions allow for better organisation of an evolving argument in discussion forums. Postings and replies are logically linked to one another and are not simply standing alone. Without following threads a conversation may appear to be in chaos and may be difficult for participants to follow. It is advisable to keep the number of threads to the minimum and it is advisable to limit contributions to no more than 200 words. If not, the volume of reading may become too much for all participants to be able to cope with. Conversely an over-emphasis on short messages may lead to conferences with multiple short messages, too many threads, and few messages of depth and real interest. Participants should be advised to continue with opened threads by replying to

postings rather than opening new threads unless it is absolutely necessary. Proper threading will organise contributions or postings to an argument, and will make it much easier to follow and to read.

On the first delivery of the sample course threads did not develop properly and arguments were difficult to follow due to the structure of contributions. The following image displays a bad example of postings on the first delivery:

- [Knowledge](#)
lebo -- Wednesday, 28 March 2001, at 09:38
- [defining globalisation](#)
lebo -- Wednesday, 28 March 2001, at 08:48
- [C&G - Let Competency Prevail](#)
Vasie -- Tuesday, 27 March 2001, at 09:06
- [response to thread 3](#)
Ethel -- Tuesday, 27 March 2001, at 08:23
- [Response to thread 2](#)
Ethel -- Tuesday, 27 March 2001, at 08:21
- [Response to thread 1](#)
Ethel (kutu) -- Tuesday, 27 March 2001, at 08:20

In the second delivery proper instructions were provided regarding length of contributions and how to respond in a thread to structure the development of an argument. The following image displays a good example of postings in a thread:

- ["Digital divide" - implications for SA-](#)
Gugu -- Wednesday, 28 March 2001, at 12:13
 - [Re: "Digital divide" - implications for](#)
jo-ann -- Thursday, 29 March 2001, at 16:31
 - [Re: Lets Get Down to Business](#)
Vasie -- Thursday, 29 March 2001, at 09:02
 - [Re: Lets Get Down to Business](#)
Nomfusi -- Thursday, 29 March 2001, at 13:39
 - [Yet another thread](#)
Vasie -- Friday, 30 March 2001, at 09:46
 - [Re: Yet another thread](#)
Vasie -- Friday, 30 March 2001, at 09:48

During discussions facilitators have to weave and summarise contributions as well as having to focus and redirect the discussion if necessary. The end of a discussion should be announced and it should be concluded with a summary of main arguments. The facilitator received criticism in this regard (discussed in Chapter 4) for not questioning and challenging learners through these techniques. Learners reported that discussions went off on a tangent and ‘infoglut’ occurred as a result of overly long contributions and irrelevant information. The technique of weaving, as explained in the next section, might have assisted with the proper development and redirection of discussions and arguments.

Weaving

Brandon and Hollingshead (1999, p. 121) recommend the technique of weaving to facilitate constructive discussion. This is one of the most significant tasks a facilitator needs to undertake to ensure that learning takes place. It is a complex action aimed at building knowledge. Learners’ messages may come in at any time during a conference. There is a continuous stream of data, ideas, questions, communications and information. A ‘weave’ is an open ended pulling together of submissions, and the encouraging of further discussion into another strand as a seamless pattern that illustrates the group’s development and thinking (Cox et al. n.d.). Messages may also need renaming or linking with each other.

In a discussion, which is more about facilitation than following steps towards a specific outcome, weaving is needed throughout, culminating in a summary when the tutor wishes to end that discussion. Tutors need to learn how to move around and through multiple roles, how to manage free flowing discussion and maintain and organize several tangents at once thus enabling a seamless ‘weave’ of the conferencing, the Web pages and the Internet resources (Cox et al. n.d.). At any one time some or all of the following elements may be present:

- Synthesizing;
- Watching for and correcting conversational drift;
- Pulling ideas together;
- Making links between learners and ideas;
- Separating opinions from facts;
- Encouraging further exploration;
- Directing the thinking, building patterns;
- Drawing threads together;
- Identifying good ideas;
- Opening up new avenues for development in the groups;
- Identifying holes in the arguments and discussions;
- Challenging;
- Creating and summarizing new learning.

Summarising threads and message content

Tutors need to summarise threads and messages from time to time. On the sample course, with forums scheduled for two weeks, a summary was provided after one week and then a final summary and conclusion after two weeks. The summaries were factual, including praise for the group, mention of individual contributions, and highlighting of corrected points before the discussion was closed. However, according to Cox et al (n.d.) there is a distinction between tutor summaries and weaving:

Summarising	Weaving
Acknowledge contributions	Acknowledge contributions Correct misconceptions Highlight best ideas
Summarise contributions in factual manner	Summarise contributions in more discursive manner Clarify areas of agreement and disagreement Point out perspective vs fact issues Identify holes in discussion Link to other discussions or resources
Comes at end of discussion, once	Many 'weavings' as discussions

	progress
Closure	Encourages and directs further discussion
Praising	Challenging
Done by tutor, almost by definition	Could be done by learners, at least partially, particularly if weaving is modeled for them by the tutor

During the two deliveries of the sample course the facilitator did not perform well regarding the techniques of weaving and summarising (see learner feedback in the first part of this section). Learners were upset about discussions going off on a tangent and too much irrelevant information being generated. If these techniques had been implemented by the facilitator, they could have assisted with focussing discussions and challenging learners. The problem is that such a responsibility demands a very strong commitment which may increase a teacher's workload substantially.

5.2.6 Workload and commitment

The commitment required of the online facilitator seems to be in contrast with what is currently required of lecturers by Unisa's print-based system. In preparatory discussions before the first delivery of the course, the facilitator was given an idea that this role would demand much more work than was usually the case in print-based teaching. At the first meeting (research journal, 2/2/2001) he expressed the following sentiments: "My normal research demands will interfere with this course's requirements... I want to go into this direction, but the work and institutional circumstances make it extremely difficult." During the last few weeks of the first course delivery the facilitator had to leave for Prague (research journal, 25/06/2001). Before leaving he still expressed fear about his competency in the course (he was a top researcher and performer in his department). He was fearful of not being able to cope while in Prague, as he would have to log on at an Internet café. A colleague volunteered to mark the assignments while he was away (research journal, 23/6/2001). The facilitator was of the opinion that one has to be very dedicated to deliver in this environment. Time management is very important in order to perform duties

during the academic year. He had too many commitments away from his office and this challenged his facilitation of the course. He wasn't prepared to commit his 'private time' for teaching in this environment (personal interview, 28/11/2001).

Unisa's semester system contributed to the heaviness of the workload as there were three exams a year. As a full professor he could not take recess leave as he was on many committees and meetings and he felt trapped in his managerial role. The suggestion was made that facilitation on these courses should be done by more junior staff as they did not have so many managerial responsibilities. They would have more time on their hands to be with the learners. When facilitating these courses, the normal workload should be reconsidered. Not having enough time to do his facilitation duties forced him to do everything in the shortest time possible. It was easier to stand in for somebody teaching print-based courses. There was always a backup. With the online work he was always alone in the struggle - and it was often to the detriment of the learner (personal interview, 28/11/2001). Nomsa, a learner and also a lecturer at Unisa, was also of the opinion that it might take a lot of time to facilitate these courses (interview, 23/06/01). A specific type of person would be needed, as this teaching approach was much closer to contact university teaching in intensity. With Unisa's current delivery practice it is not likely that lecturers would be prepared to spend so much time with so few learners. It would take a lot of convincing to get them on board. In addition, some learners were not very strong and motivated and could need more support from the facilitator – this could also increase the workload.

A second facilitator, Vasi, was brought onto the course in order to assist the facilitator when his workload became too heavy. This step was taken in order to give the facilitator some time off for normal print-based and research duties. She was a past learner, a very committed person, always present, and could always be relied on. She seemed to be an appropriate candidate for the role of

facilitator. Vasi was also a lecturer in the same department (research journal, 26/8/2001). She has took up her duties and was quite successful in the forums.

A system of non-teaching and non-commitment

After the first delivery Rian, the facilitator, was in a position to state that the workload of the online instructor was much heavier than he had expected, in fact three to five times more than the amount of work done in a print-based module. The facilitator had to read and make input every day. Critique and integration was important in every aspect of support. He had to be ‘wide awake all the time’. Assignments were done far more in depth and it was not possible to prepare a memorandum for each assignment – the nature of each assignment differed according to learner needs. He had to give much more feedback than he usually provided in print assignments (research journal, 9/7/2001). With the online courses learners received personal attention – the facilitator knew them by their names.

Rian perceived that there were also conflicting realities within teaching departments at Unisa. Not enough support was provided for this course as a course in its own right. The course was not on the official schedule of the department for over twelve months as it was not seen as a normal part of teaching activities. Within the department the facilitator’s colleagues were not interested in this course and it wasn’t taken seriously. It can be assumed that in general they did not have a passion to improve their teaching. They called this course ‘that thing of yours’ as if it was a foreign object. Should the print course be upgraded to deliver the same quality as the online course, it would not be successful as it would mean too much work for the lecturers (personal interview, 28/11/2001). There was definitely not the same amount of work going into print courses. There was an imbalance because in print almost no teaching was taking place and assignments were no longer expected from learners. If modules were to be delivered over twelve months again, there would be assignments to mark but lecturers would probably not be willing to

do the work. Learners also preferred the semester system as it meant less work for them. In general Rian saw lecturers' input regarding their Unisa responsibilities as minimal. Unisa was just a source of income and a 'soft job'. Lecturers would say: 'Do not expect more from me.' (personal interview, 28/11/2001).

The difficulty of being visible and involved in all course activities on a continuous basis was a recurring problem. At the beginning of the second delivery when the first discussion forum opened, learners were expecting cues from the facilitator, as promised, to continue the discussion, but there weren't any. One enquiry came in from a learner. The facilitator was in a meeting until 13:00 that day. With many learners having access from work this was problematic as they couldn't start taking part. This was in contrast with the correspondence culture where the time was a very patient thing and disturbances were rare. Later during the day the facilitator called and explained that he had several meetings to attend to and he was actually very concerned that these meetings were keeping him so busy that he couldn't get back to his computer to post the cues for the discussions – he decided that he had to do them at night. Rian's level of concern and commitment was encouraging in this context (research journal, 20/8/2001). The result was that towards the end of that week the facilitator entered the process as if from nowhere with what could be described as an effort to summarise or to weave (research journal, 26/8/2001):

Hi there

Desire posted a number of interesting questions – almost too many to deal with. Martha also made some valuable comments (thanks for stressing the human/psychology side). Anybody for some last minute inputs?

Towards the end of the second delivery the conversation turned onto the future role of this facilitator as presenting the course. As already stated, he was not willing to continue coordinating and facilitating the course. His workload did not allow him to be with the learners every day. He would be willing to do the

marking, but not the engaged aspects of presenting the course. This was another example of how the system did not allow teaching and involvement and how staff seem to concentrate on marking exam papers. This was the only level at which they were prepared to be involved with learners — the marking of papers which was a very impersonal part of a rigid delivery system (research journal, 7/11/2001). He also expressed his concern that the head of department would not allow staff to teach this course again in this active and involved way. Their workloads do not allow it. They could therefore not take part in innovation and experimentation (research journal, 7/11/2001).

Risking the alienation of the teacher

Rian was of the opinion that a high level of dedication is needed to teach successfully in the online learning community. He did not have enough time and had a permanent feeling of guilt because he couldn't make sufficient contact (personal interview, 28/11/2001). He did not contribute enough to the course in the second delivery specifically, other than a small input in the first forum.

Feedback was also not sufficient as there was not adequate response to the large volume of messages from the learners. He felt that he was not involved or engaged enough with the learners in general. It was not always possible to react on all the postings and he just scanned the threads and couldn't read everything. He had a look at the group presentations in a bit more detail, but it was also a lot to manage (personal interview, 28/11/2001).

The forums were very interactive. He, as facilitator, felt alienated because he did not take part in the forums properly and because he did not facilitate all the forums. He thought that initially he had expected the learners to do too much on their own (personal interview, 28/11/2001). This concern is also valid for print-based delivery as the lecturer seldom meets or communicates with

learners at an undergraduate level. Levels of alienation are therefore already high in the primary delivery mode.

Innovation in a non-supportive context

Towards the start of the second delivery the facilitator mentioned that he had discussed the nature of this course with his colleagues and that they were astounded at the levels of intervention and presence required (research journal, 9/7/2001). From a print context it came as no surprise that teaching staff could view spending so much time with so few learners as counterproductive and a waste of time: ‘Some of my colleagues asked me how I can spend so much time on so few learners. For them it did not appear very productive.’ (research journal, 8/2/01). From within his department there was no support and no help was forthcoming. His colleagues had laughed at him when he hinted at obtaining their help and support. There was also no form of credit or acknowledgement for being innovative. However, he knew he ‘placed the name of the department on the lips of everybody elsewhere in the university’ because of the course. It was almost as if his colleagues suffered from a print-mentality. They had stagnated and couldn’t be moved (research journal, 9/7/2001).

5.2.7 Managing the learning experience

To facilitate in the online environment care has to be taken of organisational matters. This responsibility is far less in the correspondence environment where the central system carries much of the burden. Depending on the kind of software system used to facilitate the course environment, the facilitator will also have to mediate with central service and support departments to ensure the success of the course. The facilitator is, to a large extent, responsible for maintaining a ‘one stop shop’. Sending learners from one point to another to take care of administrative matters is contrary to the spirit of the online

community and the nature and potential of Internet communication technologies.

The facilitator therefore has the role of process manager in setting up and creating a learning community where learners are expected to participate within minimal guidelines. He or she does not only sustain discussion and collaboration, but also has to act as the course administrator. In practice this translates to:

- Posting the syllabus;
- Setting the guidelines for activities;
- Presenting accepted netiquette at the beginning of a course;
- Generating interest in the course;
- Creating an open environment and atmosphere of negotiation;
- Administering the collectively generated knowledge base as a resource for the course;
- Grading individual and collaborative efforts;
- Evaluating outcomes of the learning process and learner satisfaction with the course;
- Evaluating the quality of postings throughout the course in terms of the learner's ability to think critically, generate knowledge and make meaning of the course material;
- Asking learners to evaluate the outcomes in relation to their initial expectations; and
- Advising on technology problems.

For the duration of the two deliveries of the sample course, the coordinator carried the responsibility of doing revision and maintenance of the online environment, taking care of matters technical and setting up a new learning administration procedure that would accommodate the need of this innovative course. If this course were to be offered on a regular basis, these

responsibilities would gradually shift to the academic department and the workload of the facilitators would increase.

Most of the learning administration services are centralised at Unisa. With online deliveries like these, especially during the trial phase, these responsibilities are not efficiently accommodated centrally as they are new and capacity has to be established.

5.2.8 Technical responsibilities

Teaching with the help of Internet communication technologies requires the understanding of the technologies that form the learner interface (browsers, groupware, word processing, etc) as well as some knowledge of the technologies that form the backend of the learning environment (servers, bandwidth, etc). The facilitator must first become proficient and comfortable with the technology in order to ensure the comfort of the participants and to make the technology as transparent as possible (Palloff and Pratt 1999, p. 80). Faculty need to be comfortable enough with the technology to fully facilitate the course. They have to be familiar with the nature and techniques of online teaching and mastery of the particular system and software used in a given course.

Technological skills necessary for operating within the online learning community are basically those that will allow the teacher to manage an online educational activity or course and to help learners navigate online. They will have to facilitate the use of special tools that will enable learners to become 'power users'. According to Harasim (1995, p. 162) basic operations may include:

- Access, and upload and download messages (e-mail, bulletin board systems, and or computer conferencing);
- Read, write, delete, and forward conference and e-mail messages;

- Open, close and delete conferences;
- Join and remove conference participants;
- Organise items for easy retrieval, either using PC-based files arranged by topic, or tools such as key words in the host system;
- Navigate the Internet, using some basic Internet tools (browsers, etc).

Self-selection for the two deliveries of the sample course entailed certifying that there was sufficient knowledge of the Internet, word processing, groupware and that there was reliable connectivity. But although learners came to the course with a lot of operational knowledge about the Internet, CMC and other relevant software, the course environment was new and they needed guidance and advice on navigating their way. Learners like Shane (interview, 15/11/2001) and Gay (interview, 14/11/2001) did experience problems searching the Internet and finding resources. Gay had trouble with her connectivity for the duration of the course. Zeta (interview, 16/11/2001) had trouble with her browser settings at the start of the course. Questions from learners regarding technical issues should be handled effectively or forwarded to a helpdesk that can provide answers timeously. On the sample course these questions were answered by the course coordinator with support from the Department of Computer Services. All learners complained about problems experienced with the chatroom at the beginning of both deliveries. Sometimes these were related to company network settings, but most of the time they were caused by improper setup and maintenance of the chatroom software. These problems seemed to have upset learners. The following message is an example of the support provided by the course coordinator regarding the problems with the chatroom:

Hi Zeta

It would seem that some students cannot access the chatroom due to personal settings. I will try to find out what is going on. But don't worry about this. Access is only needed if you have organized it between you and other learners. It is not part of assessed activities.

The facilitator will post his statements and questions a bit later today. You can relax in the meanwhile.

Regards

Japie

Becoming a competent online teacher or facilitator may therefore not only require a new teaching and support approach, but sufficient technical knowledge may be necessary to support the online learning environment and to assist learners.

5.3 From lecturer to facilitator

This section will provide more information from the literature on the new role of the teacher as informed by the responsibilities described in the previous section. It is a more challenging learning environment with important implications for teaching practice at Unisa.

5.3.1 Mediated learning and facilitation

In the online learning community teaching is seen as a ‘conversation’ between the teacher and the learners (Laurillard 1993). But discussion between learners is often left out of new models of teaching and learning. It can be a powerful tool for learning when it moves from simple question-and-answer format to deeper exploration of issues, challenging each other’s ideas and generating productive interaction and synthesis. This level of discussion has traditionally been hard to achieve through distance learning. Now, because of technologies that enable communication, learners world wide can be part of one group taking a course. The mostly asynchronous learning environment of the online learning community allows for facilitator and learners not to be at the same place at the same time.

As the online learning community requires learners to take control of much of their learning, the role of the facilitator becomes complex and unpredictable. Online facilitation requires a different set of interpersonal skills as it is about questioning, praising learners, offering advice, and encouraging them to explore and reflect. The facilitator has to take care that a rhythm of communication is established early in the course (Badger in White 2000, p. 125). Learners need to feel welcome and comfortable in class, there has to be a strong connection with learners in an atmosphere of confidence, respect, and enthusiasm. The instructor is not the chief guide and expert, but the facilitator of the shared learning process (Harasim 1995, p. 188). As a facilitator the instructor provides gentle guidance and a loosely constructed framework that is the container for the course. As ‘cheerleader’ or stimulator, the facilitator tries to motivate learners to go deeper and further with the content and ideas generated (Palloff and Pratt 1999, p. 76).

Procedures for efficient reply and feedback should also be established before the course starts. Such precautions will reduce the level of frustration with learners. The facilitator also has the responsibility to keep the focus of an online activity. As learners contribute asynchronously they may, without intention, redirect the conversation. He or she should gently guide the discussion by asking questions and then follow the discussion wherever it might lead. From very early on in the course, learners should be empowered to take responsibility for researching topics, and posting comments and questions for discussion. They can be required to share moderating functions in guiding these discussions on learner-initiated topics, and they can be assigned weaving and summarising responsibilities. In order to broaden the resource base and to share moderating responsibilities, outside or visiting experts can host discussions. All discussion content and references become data resources and form a knowledge base of ideas and information on which to build.

Collaborative work

Provision of knowledge is less important and facilitators in the online environment have the responsibility to facilitate knowledge construction. This shift implies that there is a fundamental change needed in the way the educator is viewed, learners are viewed, and how education itself is understood. This was supported by a very early study by Harasim and Yung in 1983 (Harasim, 1995: 14) where a survey of 240 teachers and learners on the Internet indicated that 70% of the respondents who used computer networks has changed how they viewed education, and of 176 respondents 90% indicated that CMC was very different from the traditional classroom. Universities should not only be “purveyors of information but also purveyors of humanity, preparing students to communicate and to think productively in society” (Pepichello and Tice, 2000: 55 in White). The pedagogical function is mainly centred around educational facilitation on the learner’s level and not on traditional teaching from the podium. Faculty in this learning process become partners with learners in an environment that is cooperative, collaborative and supportive.

Openness and flexibility

The new learning experience is characterised by flexibility and openness. Online facilitators have to be flexible in their practice and have to remain open to what can happen in the learning environment. Traditional control characteristics have to be abandoned in this open horizontal structure. An attitude of togetherness, and a willingness to adapt and adjust are important. Learners are equal contributors and should be able to speak out without fear. At the same time faculty must be able to communicate this as being not only acceptable, but necessary in order for learners to be able to take on the roles necessary to facilitate educational success (Palloff and Pratt 1999, p. 86). The learning experience becomes one of negotiation, mediation and dialogue constituting an interactive and group-based effort. The facilitative method of supporting learners is a partnership in which the faculty and learners join

together to meet learning objectives (Addresso in White 2000, p. 112). The knowledge that each learner brings to the classroom is just as important as the knowledge the facilitator brings, and collaborative learning takes place as a result of facilitated discussions and groupwork.

A different learner

Lewis in White (2000, p. 34) supports the andragogical approach that is adult-centred. For him the virtual medium requires learner discipline that presumes a high level of maturity. Online learners can be seen either as human beings who use technology to construct their own knowledge or meaning, or as empty vessels on the other end of the computer who need to be filled with data. A patronising attitude and the aloofness of an expert will not contribute to learning. Participants in the online learning community bring a wealth of experience to the class and as adults they may also be as knowledgeable as the facilitator. All participants become contributors to a shared resource environment.

Learners should be allowed to use personal problems, interests, and experiences as springboards to motivate their learning. The online environment is full of ambiguity and facilitators should understand that meaning is created in interaction among people and it includes all human qualities, attitudes, feelings and emotions (White 2000, p. 2). Negotiating shared goals within the course is an important element in creating community (Pallof and Pratt 1999, p. 110). Beginning with the negotiation of guidelines early in the course and continuing through an end-of-course evaluation of how well those goals were met, is recommended.

A complex set of responsibilities

A tutor, using an understanding of learning and group work, should be able to facilitate genuine and successful learning activities and dialogue in an online

group. Adesso in (White 2000, p. 14) provides a summary of the responsibilities of a facilitator as generated by Carl Rogers as early as 1969. They are, however, still relevant to the task of the online learning community facilitator:

- The facilitator is largely responsible for setting the initial mood or climate of the program (e.g. introductory comments to break the ice).
- The facilitator helps to elicit and clarify the purposes of the individuals in the class as well as the more general purposes of the group (eg biographical notes and asking what they hope to gain from the course).
- The facilitator relies upon the desire of each learner to implement those purposes that have meaning to him or her as the motivational force behind significant learning (learner goals are important and they should be invited to apply the course content and experience their own circumstances).
- The facilitator endeavours to organise and make easily available the widest possible range of resources for learning (e.g. the many resources on the Internet and WWW, bringing in experts through CMC, e-libraries with full-text articles, and acknowledging learners as sources of information).
- The facilitator regards himself as a flexible resource to be utilised by the group (the art of facilitation is best summarised by ‘flexibility’, but this may often require stepping in and redirecting or interjecting opinions and facts into the classroom).
- As the classroom climate becomes established, the facilitator is increasingly able to become a participant learner, a member of the group, expressing his or her views as an individual.
- The traditional teacher role makes it difficult to integrate learner opinions. The opinions of the teacher are taken as law. In the online learning environment the facilitator has to cope with uncertainty and the labelling of opinions as such, and has to seek disagreement in order to stimulate conversation and critical thinking.

- The facilitator takes the initiative in sharing himself or herself with the group (eg feelings and thoughts). This sharing should take place in ways which neither demand nor impose, but represent simply a personal sharing which the learner may take or leave (a certain tentativeness of communication as well as willingness to expose oneself as a human being is demanded in the online learning community).
- Throughout the course the facilitator remains alert to expressions indicative of deep or strong feelings (sensitive issues like race and sexual orientation coming up in a traditional classroom can cause disruption, but in the online classroom this can be better managed. Participants have to be tolerant while their personal values are challenged).
- The facilitator endeavours to recognise and accept his or her own limitations as a facilitator of learning (he or she cannot portray himself or herself as the ultimate expert as was traditionally the case).

With these responsibilities in mind, it is appropriate to conclude with a statement by Priest (in White 2000, p. 44): ‘ In the end, the challenge remains the same for online instructors as teaching remains for all teachers — to share their knowledge, time, and hearts with students.’

5.3.2 A new role for the teacher

As the role of the instructor changes to that of facilitator, or mediator, a number of aspects related to the learning experience change compared with traditional teaching. Harasim (1995: 14) and Jordaan (2001) provide some of these aspects:

- Learners become active participants.
- Discussions become more detailed and deeper.
- Access to resources is expanded significantly.
- Learners become more empowered.

- Access to teachers becomes equal and direct.
- Interactions among teachers are increased significantly.
- Education becomes learner-centred.
- Learning becomes self-paced.
- Learning opportunities for all learners are more equal.
- Learner-learner group interactions are significantly increased.
- Personal communication among participants is increased.
- Teaching and learning is collaborative (teamwork).
- There is more time to reflect on ideas.
- Learners can explore networks of available information.
- The exchange of ideas and thoughts is expanded.
- The classroom becomes global.
- Lecturers must become expert questioners rather than providers of answers
- The instructor is no longer a central source of information. They become coaches of information (they provide guidance in evaluating resources) rather than dispensers of information.
- There are multi-level resources and knowledge and they are shared by community members.
- The teacher-learner hierarchy is broken down. Teachers become learners, and learners become teachers.
- The facilitator fosters the development of closer interpersonal relationships.
- The instructor or lecturer becomes a facilitator.

In summary Jordaan (2001, p. 3) provides a valuable comparison of what is perceived as old practices and what is appropriate as a new teaching perspective for the online learning community:

'Old' practices	Preferred practices
Teachers lecture – learners listen	Teachers guide, coach, motivate, and facilitate
Working as an individual is prized	Working together is prized
Fact-centred curriculum	Problem-centred curriculum
Teacher is primary source of knowledge	There are many rich sources of knowledge

‘Old’ practices	Preferred practices
Teacher’s words and print media are the primary means of communication	There are ample opportunities to explore concepts using a variety of media
Learner success is based on ability to memorise and report information back	Learner success is presumed when learners solve problems, communicate ideas, present information, and learn how to learn

Palloff and Pratt (1999, p. 48) warn that facilitating an online community-based course may take two to three times longer than face-to-face teaching. This warning is even more important for correspondence instructors who spend less time on learners. Social communication and community have to be promoted, and additional management and technical duties are essential for successful delivery. It requires regular and daily attention by the instructor, in order to prevent communication backlog and in order to respond to contributions and messages timeously. These new responsibilities, the different role and increased workload may be extremely overwhelming for teachers in the Unisa context.

5.4 Surviving challenge and exposure

The new responsibilities for the online teacher have severely challenged the facilitators of the sample course. The unique teaching culture of Unisa allows comfort zones for lecturers where they are not confronted by learners. This section will provide evidence of the struggle of the online facilitator in this context.

Coping with a new role – ‘playing Survivor’

Rian, the facilitator, felt honoured to have been chosen as the first person at Unisa to undergo this experience. For him it was totally new and foreign. He did, however, see new possibilities for tuition (research journal, 9/7/2001). He expressed fear towards this new role and acknowledged that it appeared to be very complex and that this made him uneasy: ‘It will be very difficult. I am

fearful. I don't know what to expect from my comprehensive duty as an online tutor' (research journal, 2/2/2001).

He became critical of his role as a print lecturer as the nature of the OLC was discussed. For him the lack of support that print learners received was problematic and the course conversation was non-existent. The development group members (including most stakeholders) saw the organization as having stagnated. The tutor's colleagues saw this sample delivery demanding. At Unisa, staff did not even want to read to do their work in a better way – they were in a comfort zone (research journal, 15/2/2001). Whereas normally he would not be involved with print learners very closely, he realized that he had new responsibilities: 'I would have to take far more responsibility for my learners than before. I would have to oversee to their complete well-being – from academic issues to motivating them. It promises to be a very holistic and involved process. At this point I feel intimidated by this whole thing' (research journal, 8/2/01).

After the second training workshop session he still was not completely comfortable with this role and jokingly remarked: 'Maybe we should not start the course. The group is threatening me. Will I have the skills to build community? I myself will be an active person in this group as well.' (research journal, 9/3/01). But after the first delivery he reported that it was difficult to assess learners as he got to know them personally and couldn't get himself so far as to give them low marks or to fail them. As facilitator, he had to continuously ask himself whether he was not supposed to help them with their problems. Some learners even exerted pressure on him concerning the kind of mark they should get. In this sense he felt pressured by these learners. He had to acknowledge everybody's efforts and this was difficult with the final assignment. He felt he could not go so far as to say that the work of some learners was not up to standard. It became a moral or ethical question. It was clear that this group of learners was producing work of a much higher standard than typical print-based learners. It was almost as if he came to expect

progression and growth from each and every learner (research journal, 9/7/2001).

Halfway through the two weeks set aside for socializing and getting to know one another during the second delivery, the facilitator indicated that he was quite excited about what was happening. He saw the conversations and collaborative activities in this course as constituting something comparable to *Survivor* (the reality TV series), but this one would be called 'psychological survivor'. For him the learners were working together and struggling to get through sixteen weeks with a shared goal. And like *Survivor*, most of what they did was public and they had to prove themselves (research journal, 20/8/2001). It was the same psychological game for himself in this new teaching environment.

Feeling restricted

Being committed to learners in the online learning community is a very involved and engaged task which is to a certain degree contrary to the print-based experience. In this research project it was apparent that the facilitator not only felt trapped in his responsibilities, but also felt that he could not leave the learners on their own. The facilitator felt his freedom being restricted in this environment - he had to be committed and available at all times. He had to make sure that he had Internet connectivity and had to use Internet cafés at his own cost just to follow learner activities. Work needed to be done over weekends as he had to download learners' work and provide feedback. This all had a serious impact on what could be expected from a lecturer on this course experience. As an online facilitator he felt like one person against a group of learners. He had to be 'at his desk' and had to be aware of learners' concerns all the time. This was very unsettling and disturbing compared with his involvement in print-based teaching. It was at times not very comfortable. He had to be visible all the time and there was an immediacy to his responsibilities. He was afraid that if he did not commit to all of this the

learners would reprimand him. Such reprimand could have a very negative reflection on him.

At times he felt stretched to the limit. He had to leave for three weeks towards the end of the course and left the marking and feedback in the hands of a colleague. There was a feeling of guilt for having left the learners on their own (this is very unlike Unisa print support). Suddenly, after he had marked the final assignments, everything went silent. He felt guilty for not having wished the learners the best for the rest of their studies at Unisa. He forgot to send them a farewell message. He didn't know whether he had done something wrong. He did welcome the learners to the course but then he questioned whether he had deserted them at the end (research journal, 9/7/2001).

Disturbing comfort zones - feeling exposed

With online delivery the facilitator had to be prepared for a very wide field – the nature of the OLC-based course was such that the topic and field suddenly became unlimited. The facilitator was therefore much more exposed. He was in public and very vulnerable. Learners collectively knew much more than their lecturer - he felt as if he could not keep up with their input. It would not be impossible for the facilitator to individually produce the richness of input that learners collectively contribute in this environment. The facilitator has to rely much more on 'life maturity' than on the few facts that an individual may know. He felt very exposed in this environment, and had to defend himself for the first time with regard to his knowledge and how he conducted himself. In this regard he mentioned that he has been reprimanded in the discussion forum by a learner for using the term *Third World* instead of Developing World. And he had to apologise.

The facilitator developed a different 'view of dominance' as a coping mechanism – the learners could not be perfect in their formal written responses. He had the perception that learners on the OLC course did not read

the questions in assignments properly. The assignments were not that substantial in nature and it seemed that the learners were rushing through to complete the tasks. He came to realize that these online learners were not super beings and that they were still only third year learners. He saw himself as being a lecturer on one side with the learners on the other side (personal interview, 28/11/2001). Having this view of his role with the learners helped him to cope with the challenge. The second facilitator did not find this environment without challenge either. Vasi sometimes had to discuss issues with her colleagues before she could respond to learner questions. However, she saw the relationship between herself and the learners in the OLC as equal because everybody formed a cohesive group (personal interview, 22/11/2001).

Challenging discipline boundaries

The learners challenged the course content and applied everything to today's economical and philosophical realities. Early in the second delivery the facilitator made the following comment in the forum (research journal, 1/9/2001):

Hi everyone

I am glad that the debate is going on so actively. You have raised many new ideas and contributed in a very diverse manner.

However, I have one concern: We are studying Industrial Psychology – Human capacity development and the competent human being within the context of change and globalisation. It seems to me that most of the discussion involves economics and philosophy etc, without you addressing/considering the individual in the work context. This is what we are supposed to do.

Could we please consider the psychology aspects in the discussions. The main focus should be on that.

The facilitator missed an important point here. The course had become transdisciplinary with the department's support since the first delivery and it was no longer aimed at potential industrial psychologists. Learners discussed economic realities and philosophized about the impact on people in the global

village. The scope of the course was widened by the learners and that in turn, made it difficult for the facilitator to use his standard academic knowledge as the only point of reference. The course was taken by many learners with different career intentions. The boundaries of the discipline were blurred, and, to a certain extent, the university was challenged regarding its control over discipline boundaries (research journal, 3/9/2001). He suggested that a better strategy to protect his discipline boundaries would be to be more visible in the course and to make sure that the focus of activities remained intact. If learners were free to construct their own pathways within the course, they could digress too widely and then the focus would become blurred. But with such an overly restrictive view on knowledge construction, social constructivist ideals may not be fulfilled. Correspondence courses did not leave avenues for learners to successfully challenge the course content and he had trouble coming to terms with a lesser role of not being the single source of information (research journal, 3/9/2001). It appeared as though the facilitator wanted to restrict the learners to content only. In this way the input from discussions could be limited to the scope of the immediate subject discipline. It is possible to use this strategy as a coping mechanism. But the learners had gone beyond his level of knowledge on the topics in the content of the course. In a personal interview after the second delivery he was of the opinion that ‘they started bringing economics issues into the debates and then I felt a bit incompetent’. He did not see these contributions as part of the course – it should be strictly about industrial psychology, and he felt he had to bring them back to focus on the human being in the work context. When they complied and limited the focus of their contributions he felt better because the conversations were about the things he knew best (personal interview, 28/11/2001).

Constructing knowledge and challenging content

Early in the second delivery the facilitator made the following comment: ‘You may find it boring and I realize it is much nicer to share experiences. However, you are still studying and part of becoming a graduate is to master the theory

and slave through uninteresting information.’ Some learners went beyond the content that was provided. It was made clear in the instructions and orientation that the content was provided only for stimulation and that it was not supposed to be the primary source (research journal, 1/9/2001). Vasi, the second facilitator, found these small groups of learners very challenging. She came to realize that one should not prod learners all the time. Learners should actually be the main contributors to the debates and discussions. Learners would benefit more from the course in this way. The content provided should become a guide they departed from. In this kind of learning environment the objective was for the learners to raise questions. For example, they initiated the concept of ‘unlearning’ and their reasoning departed from the ideas on learning and lifelong learning as provided in the content (personal interview, 22/11/2001).

Being challenged by learners

Learners became empowered in this learner-centred environment. Gwen (interview, 23/06/2001) felt that she was not only able to voice her opinions, but was also able to challenge the lecturer by questioning his opinions and actions. Learner empowerment may unsettle teachers in the online environment. During the second delivery the facilitator’s performance was discussed at one point, and it was suggested that when the learners were progressing well, he should not necessarily redirect them or interfere (research journal, 1/9/2001). But shortly after the discussion he replied as follows to learner contributions: ‘Perhaps you were a bit too fast. Part of the facilitation job is to observe and then finally to comment and not to make inputs whenever somebody made a statement.’ This comment was challenged by one of the stronger learners:

Hi Rian

I have to agree with the underlying meaning of your message – that we should not become dependent on you as a facilitator. However, I don't think ... was too fast either. I'll explain.

As I understand, this course is more about constructing knowledge rather than 'slaving' through it and 'mastering' it. I think all of the course participants have already mastered the art of change and practice. The information/theory provided in the guide is therefore not to be slaved through, but rather to provide a framework or foundation for us to add our own experiences to – thus building our own house of knowledge. The slaving should therefore take place in the discussion forums.

For this reason, I would not expect the facilitator/host to comment on each person or to be a constant presence. But I would expect him/her not merely to observe, but also to add his/her own thoughts and experiences to our 'house'. Merely playing the role of passive observer may be returning us to hierarchical teacher/learner situation at school. But we are all co-learners in this course. If one person holds back, they deprive the whole group of learning benefits.

The learner very clearly summarized the learning experience and asked for a balanced role by the facilitator. It was almost as if he seemed to return to his traditional role as 'marker of assignments' in preferring to 'wait in the wings'. The learners wanted him to be part of the group without taking over the conversation. Later on in the week the same learner was concerned that coordinator and facilitator had contributed too strongly:

I (Arny) think that if we want a heated debate going, we should not try to build on the initial threads that Rian started. We need to create our own lively discussions by starting our own threads in the areas that we are about and that really interests us. Though I would like to see Rian collaborating more actively, I think the idea of this course is for us to take responsibility for constructing our own knowledge and ideas, and to shape and reshape it by interacting AND initiating interactions with each other. In my opinion, the discussions so far have become too dependent on mere reactions to the few threads initiated by the course coordinator and the facilitator.

It is evident that learner empowerment together with such strong group dynamics may severely challenge the role and commitments of the online facilitator in a print-based delivery environment such as Unisa's.

5.5 Becoming critical of current practice

Being in this intense collaborative environment has forced teaching staff to rethink their practice not only as online facilitators, but also in their print-based

responsibilities. This section will provide evidence on the critical reflection that occurred with teaching staff on the sample course.

Critical reflection on practice

Shifting your paradigm

Vasi, the second facilitator and also a committed teacher by profession, was of the opinion that there should be more emphasis on good teaching at universities. She liked looking critically at her role as a teacher, and always wanted to get more out of her teaching (interview, 23/6/02). She was convinced that a delivery environment like the OLC could be a far more rewarding teaching experience than the current print-based exercise. She would like to be involved in future deliveries of this online course. During the first discussions (after reading material had been distributed) the facilitator remarked as follows: ‘Reading stuff has forced me to change my outlook, or philosophy, teaching. This is different from being in front of a class or having learners at a distance like we do. In the OLC you are involved – you need to think differently. Your paradigm has to shift and you need to ask yourself who you are in this role. People are on you in this community.’ (research journal, 8/2/2001).

Not a nameless mass

The OLC is built on communication and support. Such commitments are difficult in the Unisa print-based environment where thousands of learners are taking one course. Only their student numbers are used in communication. The sample intake consisted of a very small group of learners and personal contact was possible. The facilitator did make contact on a personal basis and was able to chat with learners and discuss things with them. It was not about a nameless mass (research journal, 9/7/2001). He did acquire a sense of community with the learners and in retrospect he felt very guilty about the way his role had unfolded on the course. In the first delivery he felt closer to the learners but in

the second he did not connect with this much more active group (research journal, 7/11/2001).

Print-based delivery as a ‘mechanical process’

Unisa’s modularization of courses was discussed, and participants (development group) agreed that delivering the same volume of work over a twelve month period would provide more opportunity for proper learner support and teaching. This online course did not work well because 14 weeks seemed to be not enough. The workload may be justified, but there was not enough time to provide sufficient support. It was doubtful whether learners could be expected to be successful in such a short time (research journal, 9/7/2001).

For the facilitator tuition at Unisa had become a mechanical process as there was little to no contact with learners, and teaching staff were merely trying to meet deadlines. Even compulsory assignments had become a thing of the past. The few discussion classes that were still organized were badly attended. Learners expected to pass. For him the Unisa system was like a sausage machine, doing mass production and teaching was not a pleasant task anymore. In some cases lecturers were even expected to write feedback on assignments they had not received (research journal, 9/7/2001). Gwen, also a teacher, was of the opinion that print-based practice could cause one to become rigid and stagnated in practice. The result was that teachers did not critically assess their teaching practice sufficiently (interview, 23/6/01).

Print-performance as depressing

The OLC environment can be a very rewarding teaching experience with learners providing information on their backgrounds and contributing interesting ideas in collaborative settings. Having had this type of experience, teachers may differently assess their print-based experience at Unisa. The

facilitator expressed his concern that learners were doing very badly on the print-based equivalent of this course. He was depressed as he did the marking of the final examination - he thought that the current print-based delivery system allowed only for shallow learning to take place (research journal, 16/11/2001). He was of the opinion that the quality of the work done by learners on the sample course, and what was expected of them, was more congruent with the expectations for honours and Masters courses. A much higher standard and quality of learning had taken place. The work done by the learners on the pilot course was of a higher standard than that done by learners in the third year correspondence equivalent (personal interview, 28/11/2001).

Torn between tradition and a new commitment

At the beginning of the second delivery, the facilitator indicated that his workload was too heavy to do this work properly. There was no help and assistance and there was nobody to take care of some of his work, or who could stand in at times. He felt miserable and depressed in this situation. He knew what he had to do, but was not allowed to do it. He was concerned that there was no teaching taking place in general. It was also an issue of departmental politics and he felt that he was in a difficult position and was not prepared to continue (research journal, 1/9/2001). Being on this course as facilitator was like running away from a ghost - his responsibilities were haunting him continuously (research journal, 1/9/2001). He could not understand why anybody would post a contribution at 22:00 on a Friday night, for example, but he forgot that learners in the US were in a totally different time zone, and other learners may go online after hours. He asked whether learners contributing that late at night had nothing else to do with their time. The 24-7 nature of the learning community had somehow slipped his mind (research journal, 3/9/01).

In this environment he felt like being on the *BigBrother* reality TV show. He was under constant observation and his commitment was being tested. Having been in this position was difficult. This situation was perpetuated by the non-

engagement of print-delivery that he was used to (research journal, 1/9/2001). The first two weeks of discussion of the second delivery had challenged support staff considerably. The learners questioned the course content and challenged the coordinator and facilitator severely. But this was a healthy challenge. Crises created by empowered learners would keep teaching and support staff critical of their roles on such courses (research journal, 1/9/2001 & 3/9/2001). Although the facilitator understood the shift in responsibility, he had the option of a comfort zone to which he could escape if he felt it was not worthwhile to continue.

5.6 Rejecting print culture

At the final meeting of the development group (research journal, 29/11/2001) participants expressed embarrassment about the kind of learning experience being presented by the institution. The semesterisation process was criticized as it contributed to bad teaching. Many courses had no assignments and no more contact sessions of any kind. Lecturers were also not prepared to mark assignments and give feedback. There were discussions at faculties to return to twelve month delivery of modules to improve teaching and support. The group, consisting mostly of support and administrative staff, expressed serious concerns about the lack of engagement within courses. Their understanding of what was going on showed that as a result of their work on the sample deliveries, they clearly had come to care about the best practice of the institution (research journal, 29/11/2001).

For Vasi, the second facilitator, this kind of learning experience was certainly challenging to learners. Therefore it should be equally challenging to facilitators. If it were not there would be something wrong. She was worried about the level of disinterestedness on the part of the lecturers regarding learner engagement. She had also had negative feelings about online delivery at the start. But after having been involved in delivery via the OLC her attitude had become positive. There were many benefits from teaching and learning in this

way. She learned more from being a teacher on this course than she had in the past five years as a teacher at Unisa (personal interview, 22/11/2001).

5.7 Comparing print to the OLC

The major learning advantages to be gained from adopting the OLC are collaboration (improved communication), and the community benefits derived from the online environment. Harasim et al. (1995, p. 31) provide a chart comparing a collaborative versus traditional classroom approach to learning. However, since Unisa is struggling with the print-based correspondence model, rather than classroom instruction, the chart has been adapted to reflect such a challenge:

	Collaborative	Correspondence/print
Role of instructor	goal-setter facilitator resource model Learner	resource feedback motivator marker
Class structure	learners in groups of two to whole class	learners work independently in isolation
Text	contributions generated by learners and teacher(s) in addition to textbooks	commercial textbooks, learning manuals, and print-based instructions, possibly augmented with audio and/or video cassettes
Audience	learners writing for each other (writing 'in public')	learners writing only for the instructor
Lecturing	learner-centred approach based on discussion of issues and questions raised by learners	no face-to-face lectures, but only written instructions and explanations, possibly augmented by lectures on audio and/or video cassette
Revision	an ongoing process based on feedback from group members	feedback provided by instructor after completed assignments have been submitted & assessed
Evaluation	evaluation by class members, including the instructor	evaluated by the instructor alone
Collaboration	learners work with peers guided and advised by instructor	learners work alone, with occasional communication with the instructor

The above comparison highlights the difference in roles, responsibilities and activities of both the lecturer and the learners. Such a shift could not be expected to take place without proper training and preparation. In this regard Kearsley (2000: 85) stresses the importance of preparing future OLC facilitators for a very different environment. Staff may jump onto this new bandwagon and do a lot without knowing what it is about. Teaching, management and technical skills are not necessarily sufficient by default. Until such time as lecturers employ these skills in a learning environment where all kinds of glitches and questions suddenly appear to which they may not have the answers, they may feel properly qualified.

5.8 Preparing for a new role

It was paramount to adopt strategies immediately to assist Unisa teaching staff to become critical about their current practice. They could not be expected to cope with new responsibilities without a different awareness and commitment.

Adapting to new responsibilities

Delivering a course via the OLC mode is a complex task compared with traditional print-based teaching methods. Different methods of communication are used, a different learner population will enrol, different forms of assessment will be available, different lecturing styles can be used, and activities are collaborative and enabled by the technology. These aspects need to be incorporated in a well-planned design. For many traditionalists this new way of teaching and learning will be a nightmare, as it will challenge their learning philosophy and teaching approach. On the sample course the facilitator expressed his fear for this kind of commitment right from the start, and group members became critical of the levels of commitment currently deployed by Unisa teaching staff on print delivery. It was apparent that facilitating and delivering this course successfully would be a complex struggle for the staff involved (research journal, 2/2/2001).

There was no time available to develop an appropriate training program for the course facilitators on the sample delivery. After the collaborative construction of the OLC learning experience, the group decided on collating relevant sources which would serve as background reading for a critical analysis of the role of the online facilitator (research journal, 2/2/01).

The aim was to analyse the role of the online facilitator as against the Unisa context of print delivery. Background material consisted of sections on:

- electronic learning in general;
- defining and redefining community;
- online facilitation; and
- promoting collaborative learning.

These were mainly taken from Harasim et al (1995), Kearsley (2000), Palloff & Pratt (1999) and White and Weight (2000).

Providing support for novice facilitators

Teaching within the online learning community concerns sharing and working together. Facilitators need to understand participation, moderation, and interaction through CMC. They need to be highly motivated and enthusiastic, and must be the kind of supportive person that will assist learners no matter what the circumstances. This requires a paradigm shift if a prospective teacher is used to the correspondence environment where collaborative activity is difficult and minimised. Teachers will have to try out the CMC environments and attempt collaborative activities with colleagues in an attempt to gain the skills to facilitate online groupwork and to foster community.

The position of ‘course coordinator’ was created during the development of the course to mentor the facilitator in his online teaching task, and to support and guide him with his managerial, administrative, technical and teaching tasks. With this support mechanism it was reasoned that the learners (who did have the option of returning to the print delivery of the course at any point), were at less risk if the learning experience failed. The facilitator indicated that he felt comfortable with the course coordinator being present to provide advice and guidance as his own responsibilities unfolded during the delivery of the course (research journal, 9/3/2001). Halfway through the first delivery of the course, the facilitator seemed to be so confident that he could cope with his task. He called the coordinator at least twice in a month to provide him with reassurance and to motivate him to continue. There weren’t incidents that forced him to call – he just needed motivation (research journal, 27/4/2001).

In general the facilitator was unsure about what his role in the OLC would be. He had a lot of support from the course coordinator. Although he had to contribute towards structuring the course and designing components, he did not understand it very well in the beginning. The concepts and technical aspects were clearer towards the end of the first delivery. The three discussion sessions helped substantially to contribute to initial understanding. It was valuable to have had a coach with online teaching experience. He advised that the future training of facilitators should be about practical involvement with online components; learning to take part in an online forum; and using e-mail to communicate and organize the learning experience. The facilitator found it very comforting to know that somebody was watching over his shoulder and could point him in the right direction. The idea of the coach or mentor seems to be a solution for success with novice facilitators (research journal, 9/7/2001).

5.9 Summary and conclusion

From the evidence provided in this chapter, the teaching and support culture at Unisa differs radically from that maintained in the online learning community.

The sample course originated in a context where the delivery system allows very little constructive conversation with learners. There was, therefore, no backdrop of engagement from which the facilitator for this course departed, and the attempt to successfully facilitate the online learning community was a public and personal struggle. For both pilot deliveries of the course the dialogue, progression through knowledge building, and dynamic interaction was mainly due to motivated learners. Although the discussions may often have had the ‘texture’ of being successful, participants were often not successfully challenged in order to construct knowledge.

Teaching staff may struggle to be successful in the online learning community as their teaching commitments are heavily burdened and they are challenged by learner participation in the continuous construction of knowledge. They are exposed as ‘knowledge providers’ and as teachers. Currently the Unisa system takes care of most of the responsibilities. The teacher finds himself or herself ‘programmed’ by an industrial print-based environment. Should staff make themselves available to teach in the online learning community it would almost be as if they are ‘committing’ teaching in an environment where good teaching is not rewarded. It would, therefore, not necessarily be effective to rely on previous teaching experience when entering the online learning community.

The transition from print delivery to the online learning community will not be easy unless there is a common understanding within the institution as to what online teaching requires and how it can be enabled within the Unisa context (Chapter 7 will discuss the opportunity that was created to deal with the paradigm shift that was required with Unisa staff members.)

The next chapter will address the changes in systems, practice and processes that were enabled while the team worked collaboratively on this course project. The role of the learning developer (previously instructional designer) was also redefined during the course of this project. This new commitment will be discussed.