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Note from CITL: The following two pages is an excerpt from the December 2003 issue of Online Classroom and contains Stephanie Nickerson's review of Tisha Bender’s book Discussion-Based Online Teaching to Enhance Student Learning.

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**BOOK REVIEW**

**Imaginative Strategies for Discussion-Based Online Courses**

*Discussion-Based Online Teaching to Enhance Student Learning: Theory, Practice, and Assessment*
by Tisha Bender

Reviewed by Stephanie Nickerson, Ph.D.

Several years ago, I had the pleasure of being in a faculty development institute that Tisha Bender ran at the New School for Social Research (now the New School University). In that program, she taught us faculty neophytes how to teach effectively using computer conferencing by having us be students in her several-week distance learning class.

She taught engagingly, always modeling what she espoused. Her enthusiasm for her topic and for her students was contagious. So my fellow students and I became as intrigued as she about our journey together into online land. I am a brave technophobe, and I deeply appreciated Bender’s firm belief that the technology should become invisible so that we could focus on what and how we were learning.

Reading Bender’s book, *Discussion-Based Online Teaching to Enhance Student Learning: Theory, Practice, and Assessment* (2003, Stylus) is almost like being in that class. Bender always approaches topics with an openness and willingness to explore them as if for the first time.

She mentions technology only to the extent that she needs to make a pedagogical point. For example, she discusses software only to distinguish “the way responses are displayed on the discussion board” (p. 72). Bender has found that “threaded” discussion, in which responses are placed physically attached to the comments they are addressing, may be a deterrent for discussion. Threaded discussion makes thematic as opposed to chronological ordering of responses. Bender makes the distinction simply to make recommendations to instructors for ways they can make sure students are not put off by the more complex “threaded” layout of the text.

The book is divided into three parts: theory, practical application, and assessment. The theory section is short and quite matter of fact. Acknowledging that learning takes place within a social context, Bender believes strongly that one must establish a sense of community in one’s online class, or hybrid class (taught partly online and partly in a classroom).

She believes adamantly in the feasibility of a feeling of human connection in a text-based online class in which no one knows what anyone else “in class” looks or sounds like. It may be harder for some instructors to do so, but she shows convincingly how it can be done. She examines the roles instructors must take on to be effective facilitators of learning in the online or hybrid class. And she recognizes the different intelligences of students, their different learning styles and strengths, and alerts would-be online instructors they need to keep these roles in mind.

She also alludes to Bloom’s “cognitive hierarchy” (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill & Krathwohl, 1956). For those unfamiliar with this taxonomy, Bloom and his colleagues posit that cognitive learning is hierarchical; the lower levels involve the recall or recognition of knowledge, and the higher levels involve the development of intellectual abilities and skills. Each step in the hierarchy subsumes the levels below it. Bloom et al. believed that analysis, synthesis and evaluation are the highest levels of cognitive learning.

The applications section is the heart of the book and the piece that Bender has the most fun with. After advising the reader how one might design one’s course and outlining various ways one might start off the first activities in the online discussion class in a way that will immediately engage students who may be apprehensive about being in an online course, Bender gets right down to the topic “How do we speak online?” She outlines very specific ways of facilitating and stimulating online discussion, and how to set the right tone for establishing an inviting climate. One in which students are willing to do the hard work of rigorous examinations of ideas and texts.

Bender recognizes that some instructors will not naturally “ask the right questions” and goes to some lengths demonstrating how some questions will push students to reflect at higher intellectual levels than others.

Bender raises some of the prob-

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lems one can encounter in the online classroom such as plagiarism, and the “late” student, who threatens — by their late responses to topics that most of the class has long since finished with — to hold the entire class back unless the instructor intervenes. Her solutions are sensible and sensitive.

In a chapter filled with imaginative strategies for learning in the online course, Bender describes how she and others have used debates, role playing in literary analysis, virtual field trips, guest “lecturers,” writing games, journals, team teaching, and other innovations. It is a fascinating and highly creative chapter that will give the teacher new to online learning lots of fodder for designing their courses and thinking through activities that will challenge students to learn in different ways. Bender gives enough information so that a novice can borrow her ideas and put them into practice. She also outlines a number of strategies for using the synchronous online tools (real time “chat”).

The final section is on assessment, and Bender has used Knowing What our Students Know, the National Research Council’s (2001) study of assessment in light of the new research on how people learn, as her basis for much of this part of the book. She attempts to apply their thinking to online courses. Essentially she admonishes the would-be course designer to make sure they have “[a] clear and explicit statement of course goals, along with crisp, logical course structure that enables students to comprehend the requirements of the course .... Discussion questions and techniques that will elicit upper-level thinking and reflection ... A clear reflection of these discussion questions in the grading and assessment [of students]” (p. 175).

I recommend this book to two audiences: to new online teachers who want to generate thoughtful discussion in their courses, and to experienced online instructors who have not been satisfied with the degree to which students in their courses engage each other about the material they are studying.

References:


Stephanie Nickerson is senior faculty development consultant in the Center for Innovation in Teaching and Learning at New York University’s Stern School of Business.

Share Your Ideas

If you have developed an innovative online course or have some online teaching tips you would like to share with the readers of Online Classroom, contact Rob Kelly at <robkelly@magnapubs.com>.

References: