

Kris Sward – Assignment #2

February 4, 2013

Reflection on Seminar 3 Facilitation

In looking back on facilitating the third seminar of OLTD 503 I must admit right up front that I found it to be a bit of an overwhelming experience. Funny, seeing as our topic was “Too Much Information”. For our seminar, Jane C. and I decided to create a Weebly site that would be our ‘home base’ for the week, where we could outline information to be covered, summarize the readings we asked our cohort to do and try to elicit some discussion regarding how it felt to be overwhelmed, what causes us to get to that point and how we cope with information overload in our own individual ways. In the end we wanted to have students do three explicit tasks: 1) post comments on our wall at wallwisher.com, 2) create a blog post based on their own reflections about information overload, and 3) complete a short survey that gave us feedback on the week they had just experienced.

In preparing for the week, both Jane and I felt that the key was NOT to overwhelm our peers with activities and readings. Having been together for just over two courses, we figured that everyone could relate to feeling overwhelmed by too much information. Many times we’ve been inundated with a variety of cool tools or ideas, too many readings to keep up with and numerous activities to complete. We even talked about the ‘39 unread messages’ reminders in our discussion forums and how they made us want to avoid logging in. So we intended to keep it fairly short, simple and straightforward and not bog everyone down with a lot of information.

We started by creating our Weebly site, janecandkrisseminar3.weebly.com/. This is where I started to feel overwhelmed. I was so busy adding pictures, information, cool links and tips to this site and trying to be as thorough as possible so that it would be as easy as possible for my peers that I kind of stretched myself too thin. I fell behind in my week two discussion posts, got snappy with my family and generally just stressed myself out. In order to make it a positive experience for others I was overdoing it myself. Now I understand why many distance learning teachers start out just maintaining a pre-made course before moving to tweaking them to their own way of teaching things. It was a lot of work building it from the ground up!

Regardless of the amount of work that both Jane and I put in, I am very proud of how the website turned out (so proud, in fact, that I’ve already added it to my ePortfolio!). I think it looked good, had a great flow of information and served our purpose of providing the information we needed to get across without being overwhelming. This was supported by one of our survey responses which read, “The Weebly you used to present your week was informative, eye catching both in the colours chosen and the cartoons. Videos were informative. Workload was just right.” (Fluid Surveys, 2013)

Our seminar started with a light-hearted, icebreaker video and went on to include two other videos that provided thoughts on what information overload is and how it affects the decision making process, and information consumption which suggested making wise choices as to what we read or watch online. We

also included some fun cartoons, tips to reduce stress and a link to our wallwisher site that asked students to comment specifically on information overload and tricks they employ to avoid becoming overwhelmed.

My favourite part of the Weebly site was the homework section located at the end of the seminar:

“Thank you for sharing this journey with us. Now here’s the real homework for the week: Go outside, take a walk, talk with your family, sit in the sun (if you can find it), have a cup of tea and relax. Breathe.....you’ve worked hard and you deserve a break! Cheers :)” (Too Much Information, 2013)

When all is said and done, I think that it’s important to find balance in our lives and be able to step away from the computer screen, if only for a short break. This belief has only been cemented through my experience building this website and co-facilitating this seminar.

Throughout the week Jane and I kept in touch with our ‘students’ via email. Our first email (copied in d2l) was a welcome message to our peers inviting them to our website that would take them step by step through our seminar week. This started a few long days of waiting! After all the work we had done building the website it was like sending your child to their first day of kindergarten – there I was waiting for input and feedback (don’t you know my kid can already sing the ABCs!!) and it didn’t come. I found myself checking in to the wall and rechecking the links to the website to make sure everything was working, but no one was posting anything online. After a few tentative messages back and forth between Jane and I we sent a second email, our ‘gentle nudge’ email, to get things going and after that things did indeed start to roll. One day one person had posted on our wall, the next another had added their thoughts. After about four days the wall was full and I was busy trying to figure out how to make it bigger! After my initial apprehension that it wouldn’t be good enough, positive feedback and input started coming in and I finally breathed out all my worry. From this I learned to be patient. Asynchronous courses allow people to work at their own pace and in their own time and that doesn’t always match the instructors perceived timelines.

We got some great posts on people’s blogs making deep insights into what their own personal experiences were with being overwhelmed and some cool ideas on how to maintain that ever important balance (I loved Ben’s idea of a daily photo journal to document his time in OLTD – what a memorable journey!). Jane and I took turns responding to our wall and to blog posts to ensure that everyone got a thoughtful response to their work. On Thursday night I posted a closing email to thank everyone for their participation and input and provide them with a link to our survey. Jane then posted a summary of the week on Saturday with some comments people had made. I posted one final email relating to an article that Jane J. had forwarded to me. Attached was a letter to the editor of the Times Colonist about the huge number of email responses (with mostly trivial information) the writer had received in response to an introductory activity for a MOOC. Talk about information overload – it was so relevant to our week, I just had to share it.

Only four people responded to our survey that we sent out, which was a little disappointing, but in the end we received some really positive responses. “You guys did a fantastic job. Loved that you tried something new. Love, love, love that it [didn’t] add to ‘information overload.’ Thanks so much!” (Fluid

Surveys, 2013) was probably our best response, though I also appreciated, “Loved the organization of the Weebly site as well as the videos and readings. I find visuals and multimedia engage me as a learner.” (Fluid Surveys, 2013) We put a lot of time and effort into the site and I appreciated that it was recognized by our peers and that the site did its job of informing them while not overwhelming them. Though I felt somewhat isolated in facilitating the seminar, others felt “Some sense of community as you sent regular check ins and the wall help[ed] me feel connected.” (Fluid Surveys, 2013) This also speaks to our intent of keeping people in the loop while staying on the sidelines as supporters, not in your face enforcers.

Overall, I would say that this was a really positive experience for me as a learner. I am a face to face teacher and have no prior experience facilitating online learning. Jane also teaches face to face and has similar online experience. We found that by using Skype and email we were able to connect many times and enjoyed pulling together this effective seminar. Through this process I’ve learned that I need to tone it down on my end and not overwhelm myself in an attempt to get the course materials across to my students. In the end it was an ‘overwhelmingly’ positive week in that our goals of the seminar being well laid out, informative while not overwhelming, and maybe a bit of a respite from our regular busy schedules of coursework were all achieved and well received by both our peers and our instructor. I think Jane and I presented a well thought out seminar, supported student needs as they arose and had a fun and informative experience in the process.

References

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