"High Touch" in a "High Tech" World: Strategies for Individualizing Online Learning

Over the last several years, I have had the luxury of conversing with countless online instructors regarding "what works" in online education. To my surprise, I have found that many, if not most, conversations have centered on "the best way to create highly attractive visual presentations." The focus often seems to be on teaching as information distribution, and on motivating students by offering some "sizzle" in their presentations - employing cute animated gifs, blinking letters, animated simulations of processes such as swallowing reminiscent of Alka Seltzer commercials, etc.

I don’t have a problem with the notion of creating visually exciting presentations. However, I am somewhat surprised that there is so much concern about presentations, because in conversations with many of the most successful experienced online teachers, I find a very different focus. More often than not, we talk about the relationships they have with their students - and their strategies for engaging their students from the individual learner's point of view. These instructors have concern about the visual aspects of their courses like most, but much of their energy clearly is invested in what I would call "high touch mentoring."

When one takes a look at the most successful online teachers -i.e., those who obtain high student participation, high learning outcomes, and apparently high rates of student satisfaction, one finds that they demonstrate a very rich, active, respectful and responsive style of communication. More specifically, these "superior" online mentors often engage in one or more of the following kinds of actions or strategies:

- **They provide a safe climate.** They recognize that many anxious new online learners need some reassurance. Early and often, they let students know that there are numerous supports available to assist them - including the Knowledge Base and Community Forum, Help Desk Services, and their peers and the teacher. Most of all, they explicitly assure students that it is okay to ask for help, to trust them, and to trust that they will be very available and accessible - in the course, and/or by email, and/or by phone or in person.

- **They invite input regarding the goals and agenda of the course.** While they are mindful of the fact that they are content experts with clear ideas as to what students need, they also realize that learners often benefit from content that matches their individual academic and personal goals. These instructors are also comfortably allowing their students some measure of independence and control over their learning.

- **They provide much individualized feedback**--through email, in threaded discussions, as well as various other course communication tools. Knowing that learners will be gratified by and work harder for a teacher who cares about them, they give their students lots of positive messages about what they are doing well. They also offer constructive criticism when called for, provide models of good performance, and recommend links to resources for enhancing understanding of subject matter and/or to enable students to pursue material related to individual interests.

- **They connect learners with one another.** They appreciate that in interactive and collaborative learning situations, individuals have an opportunity for perspective- taking and reflective thinking, and that this often produces higher levels of cognition as well as self-esteem. In turn, they fully employ threaded discussions and various collaborative assignments, as they foster much peer-peer interaction.

*So, what am I driving at here?*

Well, it comes down to this: In this "High Tech" world of ours, becoming more "High Touch" in communicating with the individuals who make up your class will probably lead to higher levels of achievement and satisfaction for your students. It will probably pay off for you as well.

--Edward H. Ladon, PhD