

BOOK REVIEW

Mark Hawkes, *Book Review Editor*

***Finding Your Online Voice: Stories Told by Experienced Online Educators,* edited by J. Michael Spector**

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Finding Your Online Voice: Stories Told by Experienced Online Educators, edited by J. Michael Spector. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007, 232 pages, \$49.95).

This book consists of 11 chapters that focus on helping instructors find their “voice” in an online teaching environment. Each chapter is written in a practical manner by experienced online instructors, with most having a background teaching in an academic environment. However, the book is applicable to all distance education instructors in any setting, including military and corporate organizations. In the Foreword, Donald P. Ely mentions that the book serves the purpose of mentorship and dialog. It represents what a faculty member would do at a conference; namely, comparing notes and speaking with colleagues about what they have experienced during their tenure of

online teaching. “*Finding Your Online Voice* will help both new and veteran distance educators profit from the experience of designers and instructors who have ‘been there’ and ‘done that’ ” (p. xi).

This book is an excellent resource for novice and seasoned professionals who want non-nonsense guidance about activities, skills, and attitudes that work or do not work in supporting students to achieve their learning goals at a distance. “It offers solid advice about teaching and learning at a distance” (p. ix). As indicated by the title, the theme that flows throughout the book is that effective distance facilitators can and should develop methods of expression allowing them to create learning environments that are interactive and yet void of physical contact.

As stated by Ely in his Foreword remarks, the shift in distance education has been from

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“the greatest good for the greatest number” [italics original] to *“the best for each”* [italics original] (p. x) and this is where the book excels. It looks at providing a solid, effective, and authentic learning environment for any number of students, while realizing that each is an individual, with preconceived notions about learning at a distance.

According to the editor, J. Michael Spector, the intent of the book is to present scenarios and experiences of seasoned professionals in online teaching addressing the following areas:

- Teaching orientations and philosophies.
- Perspectives on and approaches to learning and instruction.
- Orientation to and uses of technology.
- Models and methods of technology-based teaching.
- Reflections and self-assessment. (p. xvi)

The highlight of the book is that most of the contributors provide practical examples of exercises and activities that have been used in their classes, along with a true evaluation of failures (i.e., “learn from my mistakes”), why certain attempts did not succeed, what was done to reassess the situation, and why some ideas were scrapped. The focus throughout is on lessons learned from the trenches, while providing the best learning environment in the eyes of the student and instructor.

Each chapter represents a perspective of the instructor’s online voice. The format is such that each chapter is a standalone unit and can be read on its own or in combination with others that may be of interest, or pertinent to the situation of the reader. The first chapter lays a foundation by addressing the question of what it means to teach at a distance. This is critical, because the contributors to this book have experientially found both significant and subtle differences in teaching online from face-to-face instruction.

In chapter 2, Collins and Moonen provide a great example of the concept of the “contributing student approach” (p. 19). Using this technique, the classroom is a skeleton template at

the beginning of the class. Throughout the semester, the students are responsible for building the content through directed activities, projects, group work, and reports. The authors assert that this method provides “both educational and strategic motivations” for the students (p. 20). They also report a high student satisfaction rate “because students become co-creators in a course, proud of their contributions and engaged through those contributions with others in the course” (p. 29).

J. Visser, in chapter 3, reflects on making connections, establishing relationships, and maintaining genuine friendships with those he has communicated with only electronically, but has never personally met. This is a critical function of the online instructor and a skill that takes time to develop. A complaint often heard from online students is that they did not feel the instructor cared or related to their situation. Visser states that to achieve and express this level of empathy for the student is a simple, yet delicate process. It only requires a few choice words, but the words must be backed up by authentic concern and interest in the wellbeing of the student. As Visser summarizes, it requires finding the right “voice” in each situation to “communicate both cognitively and, above all, affectively” (p. 51).

In chapter 4 the authors discuss scenario-based learning and provide examples from a Master of Arts in Teacher Education (International) program, referred to as MATE-I. The authors relate problems they encountered and explain why, even after several iterations of the course, some remain. They also offer realistic suggestions and guidelines for using this method, including motivating faculty and students, management issues, and staffing concerns.

The author of chapter 5 addresses the online instructor role using the lenses of pedagogical role, social role, managerial role, and technical role. He then discusses the motivational and managerial tasks required for each role. He relates the motivational aspects to andragogy and the characteristics of the adult learner. He states that managing the online classroom

involves “creating a safe, supportive, and challenging learning environment” (p. 79) as well as promoting interaction between and among the students and instructor.

LaPointe, the author of chapter 6, describes the importance and meaning behind “*interacting sincerely*” [italics original] (p. 83) in the online classroom. She defines this as, “A learner interacting sincerely comes to class prepared, free from pretense in manner or actions” (p. 83). She continues by relating instances where students or instructors have not interacted sincerely, and the consequences and dissatisfaction among all in doing so. LaPointe explains ways of achieving sincere interaction through course requirements, process and dialogical methods, task design, technology, and autonomous learning.

In chapter 7, L. Visser speaks about personal experiences in finding her online voice. The anecdotes in the chapter are “teaching and learning methods that I have found to work, that have made online teaching a pleasant (learning) experience for me, as the instructor, and that have contributed to apparently effective learning for my students” (p. 105). She further describes the roles motivation and communication play in an online environment as well as her observations regarding variations in instructor and learner expectations when transitioning to an online setting.

In chapter 8, Grabowski presents a framework for selecting interactions. The model, which is based on Bloom’s taxonomy, attempts to increase students’ active engagement (what the author terms “fulfilling voice”) while reducing busywork for the instructor (what the author terms the “tedious voice”). She contends that by learning to balance these two voices, an online instructor is able to provide the most rewarding and effective instruction possible.

Savenye, the author of chapter 9, considers all aspects of interaction with respect to online learning. She first addresses the type of interaction found in an online classroom. She mentions the benefits of interaction and those factors of interaction that encourage student

success. The remainder of the chapter deals with design elements for improving online interactions. These entail such things as planning before the course begins, welcoming and orienting the students to the course, and performing timely assessments throughout the course. The key part of the chapter identifies what the author terms “sticky issues.” These include time constraints, the changing role of the instructor, student self-discipline, human issues, and the implementation of new technology.

The authors of chapter 10 attend to the notion of fostering critical and reflective thinking in the online classroom. Their discussion “provides the framework by which to elaborate on existing work relating to the dynamics of the online classroom with respect to social, cognitive, and teacher presence” (p. 164). Online presence can be difficult to demonstrate because students and teachers alike tend to equate this to the physical presence found in the face-to-face classroom. However, the authors contend that through greater experience with online environments, “we are more adept at projecting our presence through our virtual interactions” (p. 165). The authors argue that as instructors become more comfortable with teaching online, “the role of the teacher will no longer be focused on facilitating and integrating social and cognitive presence; rather, that skill will be assumed and the teacher’s role will develop to focus more on the outcomes than the environment” (p. 165). This is an interesting point for the experienced online instructor to ponder, as most literature today continues to stress the importance of the facilitator, coach, and mentor roles.

Chapter 11 is the capstone of the book and summarizes Dennen’s thoughts and reactions to the future of online teaching and learning. The author discusses how the field has progressed since her introduction to web-based courses in 1996. She talks about how the instructor role has changed over time. She addresses the need to move away from comparison studies between face-to-face and online settings. She discusses the potential

growth of online learning and her thoughts on new and innovative ways to promote interactivity and meet the needs of individual students learning in an environment that can sometimes be perceived as isolating.

One area that I did find lacking in the book is the sometimes narrow or isolated view of “voice.” Voice, especially in asynchronous environments, should be considered holistically and include all aspects of the communication, including the timing, situation, and persons involved. For example, in any given lesson an instructor may use his or her voice to offer direction, provide reassurance and guidance, impart knowledge, or deliver specific instructions. None of the authors identified in which type of situation the voice they were describing would fit. Further, the book itself seemed to imply or did not thoroughly stress that instructors need not find only a *single* voice, but multiple voices that best address the circumstances involved.

One other topic that was missing was a description of the student characteristics in each scenario. Even today, most distance educators assume their students fall into the category of nontraditional learners, with little to no experience using technology for learning

online. However, studies are now showing that online students, even those considered non-traditional, are more technically aware, comfortable with communicating through writing, multi-tasking, and becoming more involved in social networking opportunities. Therefore, a question for the authors is how this view of the “contemporary” online learner affects the voice that an instructor should employ in class. Does one voice work better to meet the needs of certain learners? Possibly this is an avenue that can be explored in the next revision of the book.

In summary, *Finding Your Online Voice* is an interesting and informative read and a great addition to the libraries of veteran and novice online instructors, or even those who have not yet entered the field, but are interested in exploring better ways to teach at a distance. The book is written in a style that is easy to understand, and yet provides a wealth of information that can be immediately applied. As an online adjunct instructor, I was hoping to get some relevant hints, tips, tricks to enhance my course design, activities, and facilitation. I was not disappointed and am eager to implement some ideas learned from this book in my classes next semester.