

BOOK REVIEW

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

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Discussion-Based Online Teaching to Enhance Student Learning: Theory, Practice and Assessment, by Tisha Bender (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2003. 206 pages. \$24.95).

Tisha Bender's volume explores many of the critical issues related to online teaching and learning, particularly with respect to designing and delivering discussion-based courses. The book's purpose "is to switch emphasis from the technical issues of online teaching to the *human* implications of teaching and learning by communicating through the Internet" (p. xv).

For Bender, learning depends on social interaction; thus, she tackles theoretical and practical issues involved in facilitating courses that are characterized by personalization, collaboration, and a sense of community. While Bender focuses on the *affective* dimensions of

learning in an online environment, she interweaves discussion of technology where necessary. Yet she correctly notes that pedagogy should guide the development and use of learning technology rather than the other way around: "[T]he medium is not the message, but instead is an alternative way of communicating the message, that message being the *content* of what is being taught and learned" (p. 165).

As a faculty member at Western Governors University, an online institution that fosters mentoring relationships between faculty and students, I was eager to review a book that examines interpersonal communication in the virtual environment. Overall, Bender's work did not disappoint. Her prose is highly readable, accessible, and engaging. Her enthusiasm for online teaching is evident, as is her laudable emphasis on creating caring learning environments. However, while Bender prom-

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ises to address three pedagogical areas—theory, practice, and assessment—her treatment of these issues is uneven. That is, while the section on practical applications is quite appealing, the other two parts of the book were not as convincing.

Part 1, “Theoretical Implications: Building a Body of Online Pedagogy,” summarizes selected principles of learning theory drawn from the classroom and applies these concepts to online teaching and learning. Bender covers a wide range of topics, including the social dimensions of learning; the meaning of time, place, and distance in virtual environments; and the role of metacognition in learning. Part One also sets the stage for her own philosophy of teaching, which incorporates Dewey’s ideas on experiential learning and reflection, Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, Bloom’s taxonomy of developmental levels of intellectual skills, and principles of constructivism.

In part 2, “Practical Applications,” Bender addresses pedagogical considerations of course design and instruction, issues of effective online communication, and examples of innovative teaching techniques. One may glean from Part Two a checklist of critical issues to be addressed before and during an online, discussion-based course. Bender’s work leads the online instructor to ask:

- How do I present lecture material? What is the optimal length?
- How do I “break the ice” for discussion?
- How do I organize the discussion board for user-friendliness?
- How do I handle inappropriate postings and facilitate healthy disagreement?
- How do I engage students and bring out those who remain quiet?
- How do I display “virtual caring”?
- How do I handle academic integrity?
- How do I address different learning styles and assess student learning?
- How do I facilitate group work?
- How do I assess learning and grade online discussions?

Bender offers practical suggestions for addressing such concerns, rooting her advice in the view that learning is best accomplished through social interaction in a collaborative environment that is safe for risk taking. She sets the bar high for innovative, engaging, and effective pedagogy. Bender is, however, sensitive to the potentially overwhelming and time consuming work of online instructors, particularly with respect to the responsibility for ongoing, timely facilitation of discussions that may be active around the clock.

In part 3, “Assessment,” Bender addresses some prevailing opinions about online education and discusses elements of assessing the effectiveness of online learning. (Note that Bender discusses the practicalities of assessing *student performance* in part 2) She touches upon issues such as student satisfaction, quality control, and the meaningful use of technology. While raising many important questions, Part Three offers few answers. Recognizing that research into online learning is in its infancy, Bender concludes that “there should be collaboration between educators, cognitive scientists, curriculum specialists, and psychometricians ... to understand how online learning occurs in a social context” (p. 192).

Bender’s enthusiasm about online teaching resonates throughout the volume and her practical suggestions comport with a caring, constructivist, and collaborative approach to learning. The book has the feel of a conversation with a master teacher; I was ready to soak up and implement a number of her ideas. For example, Bender, recognizing that “the need for clear directions and signposts might be magnified in the cyberspatial campus” (p. 41), describes useful ways to help students navigate lectures and discussions with a minimum of anxiety or confusion. Bender also offers a number of suggestions for facilitating and stimulating online discussion. Among other things, she raises the following considerations: clear statement of expectations for discussion; utilizing Socratic, nonlecture formats; and demonstrating listening and caring. Additionally, Bender offers a variety of activities and

strategies designed to engage students and “deeply immerse” them in learning. Such recommendations include group presentations, role playing, online journals, shared portfolios, and debates. Although Bender’s focus is on asynchronous courses, she also offers practical advice for facilitating synchronous discussions as a way of building community.

Bender’s outstanding discussion of practice aligns with her emphasis on the social dimensions of learning and the role of the instructor as a linchpin for these interactions. She asserts that it is “the behavior of the instructor, who, after all, sets the tone for the whole class. I believe that it will be beneficial for the instructor to personalize the educational approach as it will provide an important step toward compensating for any feeling of coldness or remoteness that messages on a computer screen might otherwise entail” (p. 7). Bender notes the inherent difficulties of building community and developing social ties online. Thus, to provide an even stronger theoretical foundation for fostering the social construction of knowledge online, the book’s introductory discussion of theory would benefit by covering additional concerns. For example, Bender’s explication of the social construction of knowledge could be enhanced by a deeper examination of theorists who have studied the social dimensions of learning. For example, online instructors should be familiar with Vygotsky’s (1978) theory regarding the *zone of proximal development*. According to this theory, lifelong cognitive development is enhanced through social interactions; learners are guided from current levels of development to more advanced levels through interaction with mentors and knowledgeable peers. Thus, the ways in which participants in an online course interact with one another mediate the construction of knowledge. Bender’s discussion of knowledge construction, if expanded, would help instructors to understand more fully how they might facilitate knowledge interactions within this “zone” to enhance learning.

Similarly, although Bender notes the prevalence of adult learners in online courses, she does not explicitly discuss principles of andragogy. Brookfield (1996), Knowles (1973), and others have argued that the unique characteristics of adult learners—such as their propensity to be self-directed, goal-oriented, problem-centered, and driven by family and work obligations—requires adaptation of traditional educational practices. An expanded discussion of adult learning theory would encourage online instructors to consider the ramifications of such principles in their own teaching practice.

Finally, although Bender recognizes cultural diversity as an issue in online learning, she does not deal with these concerns in sufficient depth. She includes a discussion of whether online course might somehow be “color-blind” and less prone to bias because participants do not (typically) see one another. Bender quite correctly notes that “it is not right to assume that we can pretend these factors are not important just because they are not perceived” (p. 86). Indeed, educators, online or otherwise, should not underestimate the relevance of cultural differences in learning styles, communication patterns, and worldviews. Online courses are not cut off from general societal issues of marginalization and internalized oppression. Therefore, since Bender emphasizes the emotionality of learning, she could certainly address the impact of cultural difference more fully. The book would serve online instructors better by incorporating theory and resources on culturally appropriate pedagogy.

Part 3’s discussion of assessment is the least compelling aspect of the book. Bender is perhaps overly ambitious. That is, she wants to make a case for the effectiveness of online learning, but tries to do so with minimal research studies that support her claims. Also, she relies quite often on her own (admittedly learned and valuable) opinions about online learning. Many of Bender’s assertions are quite plausible, especially when preaching to the choir of online educators, but would fall

short of convincing skeptics. For example, her statement, "I would argue that what is of greater importance than efficiency is *effectiveness*, and I believe that online teaching can be very effective if done correctly" (p. 160), begs questions about proof of effectiveness and efficiency in online learning.

Bender notes that there is a "crucial need for a more rigorous and objective assessment of this new type of education to determine what and how much students are learning" (p. 166). I agree. Subsequent editions of this book (or in future works that Bender authors) should avoid taking on the critics of online learning without being backed up by solid scholarship. Instead, I would prefer to see a new edition of this work that expands the discussion of theory and that more closely integrates theory with practice (rather than dividing theory and practice).

The book would be quite useful to a beginning online instructor, as it is chock full of practical tips that cover all the bases. Further, Bender's innovative teaching ideas would be helpful as well for experienced teachers who are attempting to retool their courses or reinvigorate their approaches to pedagogy.

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