



Moderating online classroom discussion: An in-MOO discussion of the ISP Welcome Email Case

Presenting the Case/Project

The ISP Welcome Email Case is a case I developed for my Business Writing classes a couple of years ago. The ISP case asks the student to think about, identify, and discuss the various uses of email, particularly in a workplace or professional setting.

Step one of the project is an exercise on the functions of email which helps to identify the perceptions and preconceived ideas students have about email in general, and as it functions in specific contexts. As a class, we use student responses to this exercise as a springboard for a larger discussion of the issue wherein I ask the students to support their assertions.

For step two, I provide the students with a copy of the email message around which the case is centered and require them to analyze the problem(s), identify the audience and context, and plan a potential response.

Step three, of course, requires them to "fix the problem" by revising the email (either individually or as a group), and then in a separate document, assess their experience with the ISP case project.

In order to demonstrate how the classroom dynamic is different (and the same) in the MOO, I've provided a transcript of one in-MOO discussion of the ISP case (*see handout #2: "Teaching in the MOO-1"*).

Come in, sit down, get comfortable

After everyone "arrives," there is generally some warm up conversation that lets the students settle in and get more comfortable (*see page 1 of "Teaching"*). Notice how much space the arrivals and warm up discussion takes up.

This particular transcript is one from my 7:30 TTH section of Business Writing during my first semester teaching in the MOO. The class was a very lively one, with a majority of the students actively participating in the discussion. You'll notice that even though this discussion took place fairly early in the semester, most of the students appear not only comfortable but also adept at online discussion.

However, not all students are this open and eager to discuss in an online environment. I was fortunate my first semester teaching in the MOO, that most of the students in all four of my classes were intrigued and quite willing to

participate. Also, I find that the majority of students will follow your lead. If you're having a good time and getting things accomplished, they will—be it in the physical classroom or in the virtual one.

Structuring the discussion

Note: In order to provide some structure for the discussion (and to save myself typing time) I would now choose to use a combination of the “web projector” to “share” the web documents about the case and the “slide projector” to project questions or prompts for discussion. Since they can be prepared and installed in advance, I can “carry” the projectors with me from “room” to “room” and use them in each of my sections of Business Writing. However, when I taught the class from which the transcript was taken I barely knew how to navigate in the MOO, so I stuck with what I knew, “shared” URLs with the class, and asked questions manually.

During the previous F2F (face to face) class, I had given them the exercise to complete (on the functions of email). This exercise provided the common ground from which we launched the discussion (*see page 2*). (note: I have enlarged and inset the text with an arrow in places, to make certain sections easy to find.)

You'll notice that it takes a little while for everyone to settle down and take part in the discussion. This isn't so very different from the F2F classroom, but only seems so because each bit of conversation you “hear” is separate and distinct instead of all bits overlapping each other. People in the MOO are speaking to you and to each other without benefit of the nonverbal signals to “speak now” or “wait your turn” which exist in the physical world. Comments that would be considered interruptions (and rude) or responses that would elicit remarks such as “keep up with the conversation, why don't you?” in the physical world are commonplace in the virtual one. Without the nonverbal signifiers with which we've all been enculturated, discussion in the MOO may, at first glance, seem chaotic and nonproductive. This need not be the case, as you will soon see.

Because of this separation of individual components of conversation, one must be able to monitor and respond to several threads of conversation at once (this is easier when one is rested and fresh—it gets harder to do as the day goes on).

However, in a relatively short period of time, most of the students begin to comment on the issue and contribute to the discussion (*see page 2-4*).

The more things change . . .

You'll undoubtedly have noticed that the discussion occasionally gets side-tracked, not unlike discussions conducted in the physical classroom. How one responds to this makes a significant impact on how effectively one teaches in this atmosphere--just as it does in the physical classroom.

The main difference is that such “sidebars” in the MOO are “audible” not only to the participants but to everyone in the classroom, including the teacher. This apparently chaotic atmosphere can be confusing and/or intimidating to some (*see page 5*).

As the teacher, one must respond in a way that is not only effective but which comes naturally. For me this means basically responding the way I would in the F2F classroom to an overheard bit of side conversation. I will participate in the sideline discussions here and there, but will also continually try to bring them back to the topic(s) at hand. This strategy seems to work for me (see any number of examples in the transcript). Again, it helps to be able to juggle several threads of conversation at once.

And on to the next agenda item

Once their enthusiasm and energy for the discussion begins to wane, I introduce new material by sharing a URL (see page 8). After they've read the material, the discussion begins again on a different track.

This time, their interest wanes much more quickly, perhaps because this is a discussion of a specific example rather than a larger discussion about general concepts and perceptions. Once it starts to go down, though, I need to proceed before they have a chance to get completely off track so I share another URL (*see page 10*) and send them to their small group "rooms" to discuss the assignment.

In the Agenda for that day (posted in the MOO classroom) I had outlined their objectives for group work. They were told to discuss the assignment given in class, to come up with five issues that needed to be addressed in order to respond to the case and to elect a spokesperson to report for the group to the class. In that way, the onus is on the students to elect someone who can/will adequately and accurately represent the group.

Once the groups have come back into the main "classroom" and reported on their activities, class is over and everyone leaves, "waving" or saying good-bye, often in their own unique fashions. No one realizes that they all have participated in no less than three productive activities online: whole class discussion; small group discussion; and individual presentation of information.

In addition, many of them have exercised their decision-making skills, problem-solving skills, reasoning skills, and interpersonal skills, just to name a few.

Some last observations

Notice how people are more vocal in the MOO? For instance, one of my student's said early on in this class session: "DirkM1001 [to RebeccaL]: Isn't it amazing that you can't get an answer in class but her you can't shut'enm up?"

In some ways Dirk's observation is absolutely true. For instance, one student who's character name is JustinB1001 *never* spoke up in the physical classroom, and often would blush and stammer if I called on him or tried to joke with him there. But look at the way he "behaves" here.

Oddly enough (given the fact that I was nearly phobic about teaching in the MOO before I did it), I found this knowledge exciting. Instead of further marginalizing some students, as I feared it would, the MOO seemed actually, in some cases at least, to allow students who were uncomfortable participating in or contributing to class discussions in the F2F classroom to do so in the virtual classroom. Some students, of course, still kept fairly “quiet” in the MOO, “lurking” instead of actively participating. Still others gradually began to participate more as the discussion progressed (perhaps because they found it more difficult to do other things—read/send email, surf the net, etc.—and still keep up with what was going on in the virtual classroom).

On the other hand, some students (Cade, Karen, and KellyBeth spring immediately to mind), behaved just same (albeit more vocally) in the MOO as they did in the F2F classroom. In fact, it was my observation that the students’ relationships with each other—and with me—remained pretty much intact over both physical and virtual environments. For me, moderating a discussion in the virtual environment is virtually (pardon the pun) indistinguishable from moderating a discussion in the physical environment.

Do I think the virtual environment can replace the F2F classroom? No, I do not. In fact, I believe that the relationship built in the F2F classroom is the foundation for the relationships that exist in the virtual classroom. The latter isn’t likely to be as effective and productive without the former because of a certain lack of interpersonal accountability that exists in wholly virtual relationships, both personal and professional.

Ultimately, however, I think interacting in the synchronous virtual environment like the MOO has its place in a contemporary Business or Technical writing class. It is likely that many of our students will be faced with a need to communicate and/or collaborate with other professionals in such a setting at some point in their professional lives. So, as educators, we have a responsibility to make such an experience an effective part of the instruction we deliver.