

The Role of the Learner in the Learning Process

In chapter 6 of Pallof and Pratt's *Building Online Learning Communities* I found myself motivated after reading the section titled *Moving Teaching and Learning Online*. This semester and last we have all been doing a lot of reading about building online communities. With this chapter as my motivation, I decided to take the bull by the horns and apply a community building technique to one of the online classes I am currently teaching. The course is my ActionScript programming course which I mentioned I'd be teaching in a post I made last semester in the IDT 535 class which some of you expressed an interest in. Pallof and Pratt stated that "the successful online learner in an online environment is active and engaged in knowledge generation" and that "many of our students have commented at the end of an online course about how much they learned from one another." I'm invigorated to try and put that theory to the test. After five weeks into the semester I have been able to discern which of my students are actively engaged in the class and those that are sitting on the sidelines. Out of twenty-three students eight have successfully completed every assignment and the remaining fifteen are struggling at varying levels. I am hoping that by pairing-up two of the struggling students with one successful student that perhaps a synergy of knowledge generation will occur. One interesting event has already occurred since my announcement this week that I was organizing the students into groups of three with one student assigned the mentor role and the other two as their pupils. I had one of the mentors email me about how excited he was that I had selected him as a mentor, and he made a request that I move one particular student into his group. Apparently he had already been working with one other student, providing some assistance as needed. I learned that the two gentlemen work at the same place of business and that the "mentor" had taken it upon himself to help out and tutor the other student. I told him that I would accommodate him by moving the other student into his group and how proud I was of him for having taken on the task even before I assigned it. I guess Pallof and Pratt are correct when they say "some learners gravitate to knowledge generation."

So far, the ActionScript class has moved forward at a very slow pace. I sensed early on that many of the students were struggling just to understand the basic concepts like packages, classes, functions, methods and properties. I'm hoping that with this new mentoring program, we will be able to move deeper into the subject at a quicker pace. I am also hoping that this will alleviate a considerable burden that I have incurred since the beginning of the semester trying to help each of the slower students to grasp the concepts and learn to troubleshoot their own code. I must admit it has been frustrating having so many students sending me extremely sloppy code and asking me to find all of their errors for them. I even went as far as posting the entire solution code for the students online and still I receive AS files that are nowhere close to being correct. I am also hoping that the mentors can facilitate some process management to identify what things conceptually that the other students aren't comprehending. Many of them, I know, are too shy to ask questions for fear of looking stupid. As Pallof and Pratt indicated it could be that many of them are so uncomfortable with the subject they don't know how to ask the questions. The result is they end up emailing me their code files instead, not realizing that that is not how you go about learning to code in any programming language. It just takes a lot of time and effort on their part writing and troubleshooting the basic code structures and being willing to experiment

with the various classes that are being presented. Hopefully they'll feel more at ease working with their peers and will be start feeling more comfortable. Comfortable enough to let all of the info sink in. I am hoping too that the mentors will be able to communicate to me any inconsistencies in my instruction that their group perceives.

This is the first week of the "experiment," I'm encouraged by the progress I'm seeing already. I hope I'll have an opportunity to report back to you all at the end of the semester and that I will have good news to report.