

Zuo Lian: Making the Right Kind of “Face” in Online Interactive Classrooms

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A research study of 630 Washington Online Virtual Campus learners and the role of trust in high-interactive instructor-led college courses surfaced the importance of instructor and learner telepresence. Particular ways of portraying the self in online space enhanced learning. This paper addresses the research findings on how to make the right kind of face (*zuo lian*, a colloquial Chinese term on making a social “face” for others) to build more robust trust in interactive online learning.

The research itself consisted of a two-fold study. The first involved the 47-item Online Trust Student Survey (OTSS). This deployed with a .922 score of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy. The second aspect involved a post-survey interview of online students, distance learning (DL) faculty, and DL administrators in the Pacific Northwest. Given the low positive correlation between high-trust and student success, as measured by the proxies of student retention/persistence, course grades, and student perceptions, the import of trust as a factor of interactive online education is clear.

The particular distance learning (DL) model which is instructor-led suggested the importance of interrelationships between the learners and the instructor (Hinman, March 2002, p. 34). Yet, the virtual aspects of online learning might impede or preclude the building of trust between individuals, in light of the absence of a shared history, the brevity of a 10-week quarter, the absence of nonverbal communications cues, and the lack of a four-walls environment within which to interact (Spiceland, July 2002, p. 2).

Manning, Curtis, and McMillen wrote, “Trust and respect are the key elements of

any good relationship, and they are the foundation of community. Trust is expressed by an openness in sharing ideas and feelings. Respect is demonstrated by a willingness to listen to the ideas and feelings of others. Without trust and respect, human relations break down” (Manning, Curtis & McMillen, 1996, p. 101). Zand (1972) suggested that an American definition of trust is as a behavior that conveys “useful information, permits shared influence, encourages self-control, and avoids abuse of other’s vulnerability” (Fairholm, 1994, p. 133). Trust facilitates the increased sharing of accurate information (Droege, Anderson & Bowler, Winter 2003, p. 46). Information flow may affect trust. (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999, p. 172)

The absence of trust has implications. “Mistrust” is defined as a “lack of trust or confidence, distrust; to regard with mistrust, suspicion or doubt” (“Mistrust,” 1992, p. 868). This had been correlated with the degree of defensiveness present in a group (Gibb, 1961, as cited by Fairholm, 1994, p. 110). “Distrust” was defined as “to regard with doubt or suspicion; have no trust in; lack of trust; doubt; suspicion” (“Distrust,” 1992, p. 391). Mistrust may be caused by “ambiguity, caution, deceit, editing or screening, limiting channels, secrecy, indirection (grapevine), gimmicks, hostile humor, (and) lack of emotion” (Harvey, 1983, as cited by Fairholm, 1994, p. 139). Mistrust leads to waste and needless complexity. (Whitney, 1994, p. 185) Trust is easier to destroy than create (Barber, 1983; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Meyerson, et al., 1996). Trust and distrust may be simply functionally equivalent means of reducing complexity (Luhmann, 1989). Distrust may not be a necessarily negative valence. (Lewicki, Mcalister, & Bies, 1998, p. 455).

Instead of having “arational” cultures online, some deeper awareness could lead to more purposive, rational, and humanistic online learning cultures and environments. It could mean better mitigations and remedial actions for non-purposive low-trust effects (also known as “negative events,” according to Fairholm, 1994, p. 138) and environments. The online learning culture might be “social engineered” more purposively.

Instructor Telepresence

Online learners identified factors that affected their perception of online trust. The primary factor was the professionalism of the faculty and the organization which he/she represented. To discern this professionalism, learners looked at the completeness of the lectures, the fairness of the grading, the complexity of the college curriculum, the up-to-datedness of the learning, the clarity of work assignments, and the integrity of the work. The learners also looked to the authenticity of the learning, which was seen as the instructor embodying his/her official role, expressing enthusiasm for the learning, protecting learner privacy, following policies, encouraging learner participation, and having the appropriate credentials.

The instructor’s telepresence was also another critical factor. This involved the instructor’s making appropriate responses to students, demonstrating professional ethics, setting classroom boundaries, regularly attending the online classroom, and connecting the learning to the real world. Instructors were expected to have the appropriate amount of planned interactivity to support peer interactions and to allow learners the full play of their personalities. Instructors needed to promote learning between peers. Lastly, the practical and timely resolution of learner problems was desired to enhance online learner trust. These involved the reality and applicability of simulations. This involved timely handling of learner problems and concerns.

A useful concept is that of “distance decay” of online messages (White and Harary, 2001, p. 314). Effective online communications must avoid “noise” in the message. The ideas must be exchanged with shared contexts, in a conduit metaphor of language.

(Lakoff, as cited by Boal, 1995, p. 22). Lakoff observed, “The conduit metaphor says if you put your ideas in the right words, communication should just work. But communication isn’t so simple. Communication is difficult and it takes a lot of effort. What the conduit metaphor does is hide all the effort involved in communication” (Boal, 1995, p. 23).

In interviews, online learners suggested that a high trust learning environment must involve consistent and regular communications for constant clarity. One observed that the emotional engagement of the instructor was critical, with this construct demonstrated in the inclusion of personal information. The instructor needed to actually listen and respond in a timely fashion.

Personality indicators that learners used to determine whether or not to trust an instructor included the instructor’s biography and whether that conveyed professional “credibility.” Communications, course management, and the instruction should show a level of expertise. An instructor needed to demonstrate sincerity, authenticity, heartfelt investment, and honesty. He or she needed to demonstrate a consistent, genuine concern for the advancement of the students.

Instructors needed to show flexibility in accommodating learners who might have fallen ill or suffered an accident. When an instructor went beyond the surface level of work required and added deeper insights, that enhanced learners’ sense of that instructor’s trustworthiness. One respondent wanted an instructor to have a “firm attitude towards the work” in the sense of high work ethics. These qualities of patience and flexibility were desirable in various online spaces where there was high interactivity. “Patience was mentioned twenty-nine times as a desirable quality in an online discussion group moderator and it appeared to be greatly needed when dealing with difficult people and balking technology . . . Other important interpersonal skills reported included generosity; benevolence; idealism; enthusiasm; energy; organization; a sense of fairness and objectivity; having a creative spark and kindness; having a passion for what one is doing and a desire to express that passion in a way no one else can duplicate; tolerance for ambiguity; having a deep love of people and all their messi-

ness (not looking for uniformity or perfection); being a global learner; being self aware; and, finally, patience and humor; assertiveness; and tenacity" (Collins, 2003, pp. 178 and 181).

Raising the awareness of the online avatar of self could enhance the development of relationship and possibly trust between online learners. Gardner (1983) described two different perspectives on concepts of self. One described the individual as an integrated or self-actualized individual, fully differentiated from others. (p. 252). In contrast to this concept of an autonomous self had been the notion of a set of selves. "Rather than a central 'core self' which organizes one's thoughts, behavior, and goals, the person is better thought of as a collection of relatively diverse masks, none of which takes precedence over the others, and each of which is simply called into services as needed," wrote Barnes (2001, p. 252). Cyberspace tends to validate this second perspective (Barnes, 2001, p. 235).

Another learner observed an instructor to see if he/she followed the posted guidelines of the course early on; if they contradicted their own stated goals, values, and rules, this learner began to view the instructor with mistrust.

Wisdom was identified as a desired personality indicator for building expertise-based trust. "Have they taken life experiences and benefited from them? Have they learned lessons about people and interactions through life and now show signs of genuineness and sensitivity?" asked one online learner.

Assignments that were deemed too easy made some learners feel demeaned, and they lost trust in the learning. Another mentioned the need for instructor openness to accept "differences in style and thought process(es) so it is important to have an instructor that can work with everyone's ideas." Students needed to feel like they were not entering an online classroom that was set up for their failure. Without a sense of instructor benevolence, learners said they dropped out of online courses. This dynamic of student withdrawal had a dampening effect on the remaining learners.

Others emphasized the need for instructor encouragement throughout a course, to keep learners motivated and on-track. The

importance of instructor enthusiasm was borne out in the literature. "According to McCarthy (1981), the role of the teacher at the beginning of instruction is to act as a motivator and a witness. In this case, my enthusiasm as to the importance of curriculum and as a witness to the relevance of the topics to contemporary schools helped the student who would ask, 'Why should I learn this?'" (Grasinger, 1999, p. 71)

Grades sometimes seemed to be a proxy for an instructor's attitude or feelings about the student, so learners need a sense of grading transparency and fairness. An instructor needed to be open to student questions about the curriculum and its veracity in the world in order to build learner trust (C. Kinzel, Online instructor interview, March 2005, p. 2).

Students complained of "mystery" instructors who never quite coalesce as mental images of real people. "When an online instructor shares experiences or adds personality to their responses and written words (e.g. syllabus), they come across as a real person, not just something on the other side of the screen handing out grades," wrote one respondent. The textual communications needed to have voice and personality, through the use of personal and unique contents (nothing automated), in-depth details, humor, emoticons, verbal expressions of emotion, and other methods. The real presence of a real person behind the instructor role created a sense of authority and leadership instead of a sense of absence or automata and pre-programmed coursework. Learners emphasized ways for instructors to acknowledge their personhood and unique aspects. Learners requested that they be called by name rather than just having a "reply" which was unaddressed to anyone, and they took exception when their names were misspelled.

For an instructor to come across as real, students needed to be able to form a mental picture of the instructor. This might be helped with the inclusion of a digital photo, video clip, or digital lectures. This might also be helped with instructor sharing. One student gave an example of a class where students would "pour out their hearts and souls about the injustices that had happened to them in their lives," but the instructor would not return any of his personal expe-

periences in kind. This student ended up feeling like the student work was not reciprocated. She wrote, “. . . I am having a hard time thinking if the other instructors were men or women, or anything very significant about them.” There needed to be out-of-class one-on-one communications, by telephone or email or some other medium, to address private situations to reinforce instructor realness.

Instructors must also show a disciplinary face. Trust violators must be dealt with swiftly and fairly according to the research literature. Shaw observed, “Trust requires that violators of group standards be dealt with swiftly. Trust has a tough side that demands fair but harsh treatment of those who are dishonest, who steal from the firm or its clients, or in other ways act unethically. Violations of this type are more than an individual affair; they impact the reputation and culture within an organization and must be addressed with speed and conviction” (1997, p. 164).

Student Telepresence

Peer-to-peer telepresence to enhance trust seemed to develop the most effectively through mutual dependence for a course project. Learners focused on each other’s quality of curricular work and timeliness in submitting assignments. In terms of direct responses to peers’ work, the more thorough and engaging peers were, the more trust they created in their peers. Learners observed that in peer critiques, there needed to be suggestions and constructive criticism, not merely praise and support. Those who submitted work late did not merit as much trust. For some, trust-building between peers was a subconscious process.

A majority of post-survey interview respondents suggested that they didn’t consciously build others’ trust in themselves when they participated in an online classroom. The act of merely commenting on others’ work and ideas seemed insufficient to build trust, given the limited online interactions. The lack of face-to-face meeting and casual banter disallowed closer connections. Growing familiarity might foster a growing trust. The sharing of personal experiences allowed for empathy and the development of more trust.

Online learners who self-identified into

the low-trust group began with a position of defensiveness, often describing their protecting their education *from* an instructor. Many began evaluating whether or not they could trust the instructor right from the beginning. They focused on the need for respect from their instructors. They also evaluated the instructor’s willingness to help. Low-trust learners consciously worked to convey a sense of their own trustworthiness to others.

The respondents who perceived their online classrooms as being low-trust apparently paid attention to building trust between peers by being “encouraging and active” participants. The need for substantive and authentic communications appeared in several responses. Others offered help to their peers in terms of sharing their online learning expertise and other learning. Another way to build trust between peers was to share course insights and complaints by email in ad hoc listservs that the learners created.

Faculty members evaluate online learners for trust as well, and they focus on whether learners followed role expectations. “There has to be a partnership between the student and the instructor that results in the student gaining the expected outcome. If the student understands this, then this bond or trust is manifested.” (L. Goolsby, Online instructor interview, April 2005, p. 2) The effort that learners put into their work correlated with faculty trust. M. St. Peters wrote that she looked for particular student behaviors to build trust. “My trust in them increases as I see the effort and thought they are putting into their work. They may suggest that we form an extra ‘round table’ discussion group to further discuss students’ research. They may show that they are reading the other students’ questions by responding with excellent suggestions.” (April 2005, p. 2)

Yet another instructor highlighted the forming of student alliances in study groups as yet another sign of learner bonding and trust. “I have found that my students learn to share their questions about class content and difficulties with understanding ideas with one another, and this has tended to create ‘groups’ of friends who communicate freely and often. Likewise, some students who have tended to be negative or

caustic seem to be excluded from this experience," wrote R. Dana (Online instructor interview, April 2005, p. 2).

Administrator Telepresence

Administrators need to create a holding environment in which trust may grow. They may create the policy structure to support professional online instruction. DL administrators facilitated the building of online learner trust through "clear communication, consistent management and organization, and good judgment" (M. Reisman, Distance learning administrator interview, March 2005, p. 2). K. Broughton suggested the importance of building systems that allow trust to develop. "That might be done by providing systems and processes that work and are not overly cumbersome, by providing clear and frequent and various communications to all users, by quickly and completely investigating any complaints or concerns and giving quick feedback, by trying to stay a little ahead of the curve so the program doesn't get stuck, and by planning changes carefully," said Broughton (DL administrator interview, March 2005, pp. 3 - 4). Administrators needed to ensure that every aspect of their programs was running efficiently to support learner trust. They also needed a presence in the awareness of student learners to emphasize their professionalism.

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