

An investigation into the roles and competencies of an online facilitator

by

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Summary

With the emergence of technology and the increased demand for online courses, traditional classroom facilitators, instructors and trainers are nervous, reluctant and sceptical to teach in the online environment because they do not know what is expected of them. The research goal was to establish what different roles the online facilitator played in the online environment as well as to identify which people competencies, thinking competencies and energy¹ competencies the online facilitator needed to function in the online environment.

The basis for this instrumental case study was the eLearn ORO 880 online module for the Master's degree in Computer Assisted Education. The module simulated the popular reality television series, *Survivor*, implementing the same rules and events that took place in the television series – the location just shifted to cyberspace. The name was adapted to *CyberSurviver*, emphasising 'surf', to indicate surfing the Internet to get to various locations. A specific online facilitator was selected because this facilitator had experience in teaching and facilitating online classes. She was also one of the students who obtained a distinction for this module in 1998 and had experience of the demands of this module. This online facilitator was particularly interested to facilitate this module for personal development reasons. Data were gathered by means of researcher field notes, being an observer participant; a focus group interview and a face-to-face interview with the online facilitator; a self-administered e-mailed questionnaire and various sets of text messages, after using pre-selected web-based communication tools. Content analyses were done by comparing the online facilitator's text messages to the Blignaut and Trollip (2003) taxonomy of faculty participation in asynchronous learning environments to establish the online facilitator's roles.

The researcher conducted a second content analysis of the facilitator's text messages to identify the 'visible' online facilitator roles. The researcher used the Blignaut & Trollip (2003) taxonomy as a framework. For visibility, the online facilitator fulfilled five roles: **administrator**, to conduct timeous course administration; **social supporter**, to maintain social and emotional support; **instructor**, to facilitate the learning process; **guide**, to encourage interactivity to foster the building of new knowledge; **mediator**, to ensure fair play.

¹ A term used in the *Work Profiling System*. It is important to maintain a high energy level because it engages the group by grabbing their attention, gaining their interest and keeping it fun. The facilitator's energy rejuvenates the topic indirectly.

The identified five roles were then subjected to the *Work Profiling System* Job Analysis Questionnaires (JAQs) to rate 'high' and 'extreme' people competencies, thinking competencies and energy competencies for the role of an online facilitator. The results generated in the *Work Profiling System* report indicated that the online facilitator needed at least 13 competencies to be effective in the role of an online facilitator.

The identified 'high' and 'extreme' people competencies were *inter alia*: motivating others; developing others; interpersonal sensitivity; teamwork; building and maintaining relationships.

The identified 'high' and 'extreme' thinking competencies were *inter alia*: judgment; information gathering; problem analysis; written communication skills; technical skills and competence.

The identified 'high' and 'extreme' energy competencies were *inter alia*: self-confidence; persuasiveness and oral communication skills.

Keywords:

CyberSurviver; online facilitator roles; online facilitator competencies; instructor; guide; social supporter; administrator; mediator; 'facilitator finesse'²; eLearning.

² This term was developed for this study. 'Facilitator finesse' encompasses the same components of 'teacher talk', namely using an andragogical approach, incorporating humour and emoticons and using control talk. However, two components were added, namely Greetings and Closings and Clear Subject lines. 'Facilitator finesse' is a term that should display the skill of the online facilitator in terms of how s/he interacts with learners and tactfully handles difficult situations.

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