

Multiple experiences of online learning

Accommodating type differences



Anne Russell

Each participant has a different experience of the same online course

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I felt daunted by the idea of online networking initially, and revealing my work to so many other people.

(INTJ)

You have the opportunity to learn with the best in the comfort of your own home, with coffee and chocolate standing by.

(ESFP)

When designing an online course, I'm always conscious of the needs of the learner. Perhaps a single parent with teenage children, a full-time job, and one computer in the house? Or a sole earner in a family with a non-working partner and children, living full life-styles?

These are some stereotypes, obviously not true of everyone—but, as with any stereotype, there is some element of truth.

Online teaching can provide a variety and flexibility often not found in face-to-face teaching. In a well-designed course, each person has the opportunity to learn in ways best suited to their personality preferences. Some prefer to learn independently, others to be part of a community of learners. Both can be catered for in the same course.

In teaching external and online courses over 20 years, I have invited feedback on what is happening in the learners' minds and environments.

At the conclusion of a four-week online module that introduced the MBTI to postgraduate teacher-librarians, I asked each student for insights into their learning experiences. They experienced many different emotions:

Beginning the module, my first emotion was Fear. I didn't know anything about this!

Worry followed, not wanting to give personal reports; then Relief, others felt the same way, followed by Contentment, feeling comfortable amongst the group.

(ISTJ)

Recognising the fears and motivations of different personalities has helped me design online courses to meet the specific needs of students:

I found the online ... communication quite thought-provoking. It gave me time to read other people's responses and think about what mine would be. It helped me not to worry about if my responses were right or not.

(ISTJ)

To illustrate the experiences instructors might consider when designing and teaching online courses, the tables on the following pages present voices from each of the 16 types. These expressions might also be useful for learners to understand how they might approach online courses.

My courses have three phases:

1. Overcoming fear
2. Becoming comfortable
3. Forming conclusions

Phase 1: Overcoming fear

In a non-threatening environment, building familiarity with the facilitator, the other participants, and the program content.

In this phase, participants introduce themselves via an email list or discussion forum, with information about their work or home environments, and what they expect to gain from the course.

Extraverts often desire a video or audio conference, photos or webcam attached to a chat room, so that they can see their peers' body language or hear their voice inflections.

A fun activity related to course content is appropriate at this time. I might provide a photograph on a web site for the students to comment on.

In my instructions I stress that their responses will be quite different, and that these differences are valued. A web forum for posting the responses provides the evidence of the individual differences. Every response is, of course, correct!

(Students reflect on their responses during Phase 2.)

To introduce the course, an early web forum posting is stimulated by directing the students (via a website, or in the course materials) to a relevant, easily-accessible article. Each student identifies one aspect of the article for discussion, and provides a personal or practical example to support or contradict its content.

Every contribution is acceptable and differences are valued, ideally leading to student-to-student forum discussions.

In Phase 1 I encourage informal reflective writing and responses to colleagues. I do not use the forum to respond to individual students or their contributions, as that may divert their attention to me as an authority, away from their reflective colleagues who have much to offer in the learning environment. (I might post a comment on, or summary of, the discussions.)

Students are required to post a reflection on their understanding of the course content, with examples of applications in their work or social environments. I interact with each participant with a 'compassionate critique' interspersed through their message, and return this email privately. If relevant, students will share my comments with others in a chat room or discussion posting.

A Frequently-Asked Questions page provides an anonymous place where I can post answers to personal or group questions. Sometimes I create questions from the personal emails I receive, so that all participants have the opportunity to be guided in a particular direction. Alternatively, I will post as a general summary to the discussion forum.

Phase 2: Becoming comfortable

Understanding the theory, and providing practical applications or examples based on each participant's personal experience or observations.

Different understandings of the content are appreciated and valued.

In this phase, students are required to research and understand the course content. To explain their understanding they identify specific aspects with personal applications or examples. These are posted to a discussion forum where other participants can read, reflect and understand a variety of approaches to the content.



I provide a photograph for students to comment on

My main challenges were to understand the theoretical concepts ... This was made easier through examining practical examples for each activity and forum.

(ISTJ)

Providing different topics for students to select from addresses their personal interests and offers a wider coverage of the course content. Ideally, several students address each topic to provide diversity in approach and understanding. I might create several different forum topics for discussion. Students may be required to post a question or insight to a forum other than the one on their selected topic.

I found it extremely difficult to share personal feelings and experiences ...

It was also quite a problem verbalising my ever-changing and sometimes chaotic thoughts.

(INFJ)

I hate to be wrong, and I was always worried that I had misunderstood something and my answer wouldn't be right.

(ISFJ)

For many types, for different reasons, sharing personal reflections is difficult. Some are afraid of 'getting it wrong' and being ridiculed. It is essential to provide a compassionate environment where critiques are constructive, offering other perspectives.

Many students appreciate examples of what's expected, before they are comfortable contributing to a public forum. Students with a *perceiving* orientation want to gather more information from their colleagues and resources, and need definite dates for their contributions.

I usually ask for at least two thoughtful contributions per week. Some students aim for perfection and spend many more hours than I expect on their contributions. This is a concern for me.

I felt frustrated with my ability to put my thoughts into succinct statements. I find it hard to just let my thoughts flow.

All postings, including this one, were drafted first, because I need to evaluate what I have written.

(ISFJ)

Loved reading all of the contributions, and discussed some of them with my husband.

The study guide ... allowed me to proceed step-by-step [and] was practical. I was able to use some of my own experiences to solve the tasks, and I enjoyed applying what I had learnt.

(ESFJ)

In some courses I organise participants into teams of four or five. Each team is given (or selects) a unique topic to explore, using personal research combined with discussion forum, email, chat, and any other strategy they elect.

Having introduced the concept of the synergy of different personalities working together, I encourage team dynamics that value a variety of approaches.

In the final stage of Phase 2 each team teaches their topic to the rest of the class. Their 'presentation' may be in the form of an interactive website, a webquest, a trivia quiz (where clues are given and people explore websites to find the answers), or any other interactive strategy.

Each individual explores other teams' presentations, and so builds a richer understanding of the course content.

Providing different topics addresses the students' personal interests

Phase 3 : *Forming conclusions*

Analysis and summary of what participants have learned, with suggestions as to how they plan to apply the theory.

In a formal course, final assessment occurs in Phase 3.

Because of the vagaries of assessment as part of a team, I assess participants individually, according to the course content they have learned, and their recognition of relevant applications in the future. In the discussion of the course content, I require analyses of the processes of information gathering and knowledge creation.

If there have been extensive discussions and public interactions, I ask the students to nominate a number of interactions as their most important contributions to the course, on which they wish to be assessed.

Multiple experiences

Online courses can provide multiple opportunities for addressing personality differences.

When the participants and the teacher each understand their own preferences, opportunities are presented for different approaches to the course content. While the participants are required to follow some rigour, each is able to employ strategies best suited to their individual learning style.

Can learning be achieved online just as well as—or even better than—in face-to-face situations?

As one student, an INTJ, wrote:

The pedagogy that we should apply in classrooms was evident here: the intellectual quality, connectedness, supportive classroom environment, and recognition of difference. ❖

References

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Anne L Russell and Robyn Lamer, 'Just tell me my four letters!: Negotiating and confirming self-selection of type preferences', *Australian Psychological Type Review* 5:3 (November 2003), 19-24.

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8 quick approaches by online learners

Introversion: Appreciate an asynchronous environment that allows time for reflection with a sense of anonymity.

Extraversion: Enjoy diversity of participant interactions. However, would prefer face-to-face discussions incorporating interpretation of body language and verbalising of personal thoughts.

Sensing: Seek practical examples for relevant lifestyle applications.

Intuiting: Seek structural information for potential future applications.

Thinking: Need to create worthwhile knowledge.

Feeling: Need personal stories to apply different approaches to content.

Judging: Value reading discussions to ensure personal input and information will be correct.

Perceiving: Value variety and quantity of information—though may be concerned with overload.

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As a faculty member in Education at Queensland University of Technology until last year, Anne introduced interactive videoconferencing to her online learning courses. She is now director of Synergies of Difference.

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Each student is able to employ strategies suited to their learning style

Table 1a: Multiple experiences, in the words of each type (part 1)

Individuals' valuable insights into differences and similarities in participating in online courses.

<p>[Communicating in writing] allowed me to develop my ideas fully through reflection before I had to contribute them to the forum in their final format. Most of the forums, once written, were reflected on for a period of days, and then were given a final polish before being submitted.</p> <p>Everything that I learned was directly related to either my private life or to my work, and so for me held great value. My main challenges were to understand the theoretical concepts ... This was made easier through examining practical examples for each activity and forum.</p> <p>In an online community such as this one I, as an ISTJ, was able to gain the benefits of interaction with other participants whilst still having a large degree of independence to work alone.</p>	<p>ISTJ Si with Te</p>
<p>I have all this precious information – how can I use it practically in my life? I want to use the new things I learn. My sensing function wants to know more!</p> <p>I find writing in web forums much more comfortable than speaking face to face. Here, they cannot see me and relate what I am writing to the real person (I fear rejection, ridicule or criticism) ... I can communicate much more succinctly in a written mode than in a spoken mode. I was more able to express my feelings and divulge information in a non-threatening medium.</p> <p>I spend more time on a task than is necessary, as I have to attain all the facts before I can proceed with the task at hand.</p>	<p>ISFJ Si with Fe</p>
<p>If I am uncertain about what type of thing to write, I can look at what others are saying and see if my way of doing it is in line with what they are doing. This eliminates the fear of 'doing it wrong.'</p> <p>The chat room provided a place to ask a question or get a perspective without feeling like you are the only one asking questions.</p>	<p>INTJ Ni with Te</p>
<p>I always have a diverse range of projects or goals on the go and in the workshop (of my thoughts!) all at once. I tend to neglect the here and now for these projects, and I need to be careful not to enjoy the planning of them more than the actual doing!</p> <p>I like to really take things in and mull over them. I know I would not have talked about the bulk of the things I've written here in a face to face situation.</p> <p>Having the time to be able to reread, compare and think about exchanges makes this form of networking provide for more thoughtful, and therefore probably more worthwhile, feedback.</p>	<p>INFJ Ni with Fe</p>
<p>I like to hear other people's opinions and bounce ideas off them, in order to help me in my decision-making processes. I have this need to explore every possibility before committing myself.</p> <p>Also I find writing in sentences demanding. I am more able to make sense if I write in dot-point form.</p> <p>I am a hands-on person who needs practical examples – this is why I relied so heavily on the web forum contributions of others.</p>	<p>ISTP Ti with Se</p>
<p>The web forum discussions really suited my Ti dominant because I had the chance to reflect as much as I wanted before responding, thanks to their asynchronous nature. This was balanced nicely by the chat room which catered to my Ne aux and its liking for 'going with the flow.'</p> <p>I like to affirm people by validating their thoughts with reflective listening.</p>	<p>INTP Ti with Ne</p>
<p>I want to hear lots of stories, examples and experiences from knowledgeable people. I tried to look on the exercises as a bit of fun and be open to something new. You can be at once more free and distant.</p> <p>I found the open-ended nature of some of the tasks frustrating. I like tasks that have a definite right or wrong answer or have very clear guidelines about what is expected.</p>	<p>ISFP Fi with Se</p>
<p>My brain keeps going into overload as I keep trying to gather more information. Chaos of Ne [struggling] to reach a conclusion. Need time to read information, absorb it or cogitate over it.</p> <p>I like personal stories to recognise personal similarities and differences.</p> <p>The biggest challenge was being so open with my feelings. I am not used to baring my soul to people I do not know. I was pleased of the anonymity of the online format.</p>	<p>INFP Fi with Ne</p>

Continued over ➤

Table 1b: Multiple experiences, in the words of each type (part 2)
Individuals' valuable insights into differences and similarities in participating in online courses

ESTJ	When I do not understand something ... I need to discuss ... my questions with people around me who had no idea what I was talking about. Even though it may not have helped them and they didn't give me any answers, I find that if I verbalise it, I gain more meaning and it helps me to formalise it in my mind.
Te with Si	I like to see examples of what I need to do . . . You get to know people without actually getting to know people.
ENTJ	Study Guide excellent – logically guided me through and allowed me to flick readily backwards and forwards when I needed to clarify particular points/concepts.
Te with Ni	[Web forums] made fascinating and insightful reading. I only wish I'd had more time to actively engage with my colleagues in this unit. [Online networking is] clearly a powerful tool where a tremendous depth of knowledge and experience can be shared/exchanged in a tangible and accessible way like never before.
ESFJ	I did enjoy talking to other students in the chat room, but was hindered by my lack of fast typing and trying not to get off the topic.
Fe with Si	I found writing the web forums helped me to develop a greater understanding ... as I had to apply the theory. I found it helpful to read other people's web forum contributions as they were windows into [the theory].
ENFJ	I have enjoyed reading the contributions and feeling part of a valuable learning group.
Fe with Ni	My dominant Fe preference much preferred to hear people's voices and respond immediately without the limitations of my fingers! I was desperate to see how I could use this knowledge for the future.
ESTP	Always seemed to be too busy getting the task done, which was a real shame as I need discussion and interaction.
Se with Ti	I was always feeling I'd like to actually talk in person. How about a video conference? Always do postings as a Word document and copy and paste.
ESFP	I was able to initiate the conversation. I felt energized by the interaction. It was a chance to learn by doing rather than just reading and writing.
Se with Fi	I really enjoyed the chat room. I found it energizing to be a part of the group and have people to read what I had said and feed the information back to me straight away. The chat room was like having a captive audience to interact with. Web forum discussions . . . were helpful in that they allowed me to see how other people had approached the task and reassured me that I was on the right track. I also enjoyed interacting with new people. I would have loved to have photographs of everyone so I could picture them as I read their contributions or chatted. ... I have created my own images of some people in my mind, which are probably way off the mark.
ENTP	At all stages, there were 'Ah Ha' moments which I felt indicated how 'connected' and 'real to life' this module was.
Ne with Ti	I especially liked the less formal style of writing that the web forum allowed. Even though I love to communicate face-to-face, the fact that all our contributions were written meant they could be referred back to, and were not lost/ forgotten/ misinterpreted as conversation can often be.
ENFP	I prefer to have a lot of flexibility, which was the case with this subject's structure.
Ne with Fi	I was so impressed with the quality of the forum contributions, and I am so proud to be a part of this community of learners and visionaries! Truthfully, the least successful environment for my learning (as a participant) was the chat room. I found it quite awkward to succinctly contribute my thoughts. I, however, found reading the chat logs very interesting. I think that as an extravert, I would have enjoyed more participants in the chat room so that I had more diversity of information to access, but ultimately I prefer face-to-face discussions. The ability to talk to someone face-to-face also helps me understand what is being said, as the non-verbal interactions assist in giving me an overall insight into what the person is actually saying.