

# Social places in virtual spaces

## *Testing a social learning community in an online course*

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Even by EdTech's educationally non-conformist norms, Sheila Bolduc-Simpson is a non-traditional student. The woman is, after all, working on her fourth master's degree.

I met her at the 2010 ISTE conference. I don't know what I said, but somehow I inspired this full-time Florida Gulf Coast University instructor to earn yet another master's degree. She wrote a paper in EDTECH 504, Foundations of Educational Technology, that she thought had some promise—and so did the editor of Distance Learning, who published Sheila's action research paper written originally as a class assignment.

Sheila's husband, Mark, an associate professor in the FGCU College of Education, assisted in the design and implementation of the research project that Sheila summarizes here.

### By Sheila Bolduc-Simpson

Effective face-to-face (F2F) classroom discussions are those in which learners discover and explore dissonance or inconsistency among themselves, and through the process of asking and responding, students test their understanding of some new concept against existing cognitive schema or personal experience to negotiate meaning.

From the fast-paced spontaneity of F2F discussions, how can instructors successfully shift to text-based, asynchronous online discussion? Where is the noise, the laughter, and socializing in an online forum?



**SHEILA BOLDUC-SIMPSON**

Online forum posts in [Sheila's] ENC 3250 Professional Writing course tend to be lean and focused on the topic-of-the-week, so she

created a socializing forum called *Anything Else Café* and required participation .

Data collection included:

- Studying activity trends, total post activity, etc.,
- Examining the content of posts, and
- A survey of student observations and opinions.

Just over 88 percent of students said it was important or somewhat important to have a social community for online learners.

Most students (61.8%) participated because they had to, but 32.4 percent intentionally used the Café to socialize and answer other students' questions.

### Strategies

- Students must know that effective online courses are both collaborative and social experiences.
- Separate content forums from the social forum.
- Make socializing mandatory.
- Allow students to answer other students' questions. **It's part of learning.**