

FOSTERING INTERACTIVITY AS A WAY TO BETTER TEACH CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT ONLINE

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ABSTRACT

This case study presents the impact of synchronous and asynchronous interactivity within a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) online course from an instructor's perspective. Interactivity has been defined numerous ways in online learning literature (Roblyer & Ekhaml, 2000). For the purpose of this paper, interactivity is defined as humans interacting with each other over a distance (Sexton, 2002). Synchronous learning is defined by Hrastinki (2008) as a learning environment facilitated by media, such as chat room interaction; participants are online and interacting in real time. Hrastinki (2008) defines an asynchronous learning environment as being facilitated by media, such as discussion boards; participants are not online at the same time. Finkelstein (2006) presents five major functions served by synchronous online interaction: instruction; collaboration; support; socialization and informal exchange; and extended outreach. Chou (2002) states that a higher percentage of social-emotional interactions occur in synchronous learning environment and suggest such interactivity improves the distance-learning environment. The authors concur after analyzing the experience of designing, implementing, and revising an online CRM class to be more interactive.

The CRM course was offered through the Blackboard platform and was organized into ten, one-week modules. The course was first offered as an asynchronous class and the evolved into a blended combination of asynchronous and synchronous interactive instructional methodology. In the initial asynchronous class, students interacted one-to-one with the instructor via email and through grading feedback; participated in discussion board postings with student peers; individually completed journal entries each week; downloaded instructor audio lectures to complement textbook readings; and completed a class project.

As the class evolved, the synchronous requirement was added. Adobe Connect was used to create, manage, and implement real time student conversations facilitated by the instructor. Each discussion session lasted one hour. To accommodate schedules and keep the groups

relatively small, students chose between six possible sessions per week. Students actively constructed the session content, and thereby supported the presence and validity of Finkelstein's (2006) functions, particularly collaboration and informal exchange. At first, some students had difficulty adjusting to the speed of the exchanges, but the majority seemed comfortable and confident enough to express themselves. The exchanges were usually courteous and respectful. Students made an effort to participate actively. From the instructor's perspective, students seemed more motivated, generating questions and answers, which is sometimes not the case in a face-to-face setting. Students seemed more "present" than in a face-to-face environment. The format allowed the instructor to get a precise assessment of the students' comprehension of course material.

Roblyer and Ekhaml's (2000) course interactivity assessment rubric was used to confirm the authors' belief that the quality of the class was improved. The rubric measured interactivity through four variables: social goals of interaction; instructional goals of interaction; types and uses of technology; and impact of interactivity-changes in learner behaviors. On the rubric's scale of 1-20, the course was evaluated at a score of 17 - having high interactive qualities.

Interestingly, the evolution of the course was in itself an example of good CRM implementation. Bodenber (2001) stated, "CRM comprises the business processes an organization performs to identify, select, acquire, develop, retain and better serve customers. These processes encompass an organizations end-to-end engagement with its customers and prospects over the lifetime of its relationship with them." These business processes were performed to better serve the "customers" – the students.

The authors caution that adding the synchronous component requires a great deal of planning, a time commitment to holding multiple chat sessions, and the willingness to accept a certain loss of control as conversations are controlled by students and only facilitated by the instructor.

References Available on Request