Sue was a student in a fourth-year online course on nursing leadership. She had been an RN for many years and had recently decided to complete two years of online courses to obtain her bachelor’s degree in nursing. Having been away from formal studies for many years, she was apprehensive about returning to school, despite being very competent in the workplace; in fact, her colleagues often asked her for help and advice, and she was often asked to preceptor new nurses. Yet she was nervous on September 1, the first day of the course.

Sue logged on early on day one, determined to make a positive impression on the instructor and her classmates. She was surprised that the instructor had already posted a warm, welcoming message and a photo of herself. The message seemed to be written just for
Sue—the words felt personal and the tone was encouraging and hopeful. *She looks really friendly and approachable*, Sue thought, making a mental note to ask the instructor questions about the course if she became confused or needed more information.

Proceeding to the first unit of the course, Sue found another surprise. The instructor had posted a short video outlining some of the key themes for the unit. The video was the first learning activity for the unit and had the intriguing title of “Me to You Video.” Sue watched the video twice. The first time, she attended to the content, and the second time, she focused on the setting and on the teacher—what she was wearing, her smile, the surroundings of her office. Now knowing more about her teacher, she felt a little less nervous.

The course proceeded and Sue finished successfully, having learned a great deal about leadership and about her own leadership skills and abilities. Throughout the course, she had shared emails with her instructor, often asking for clarification or further information on a topic of interest. The instructor had responded to all of her queries promptly, and each response seemed personalized to Sue’s issue. The words in the responses always addressed Sue’s question and challenged her insights. Sue looked forward to these connections. Not once did she feel that she was “bothering” her instructor.

Although Sue relished her success in the course, she admitted to her husband that she would miss the class. Beyond the interactions with the instructor, she had forged many positive relationships with other students in the course. The learning environment in this online course encouraged students to work collaboratively and to share their knowledge, skills, and ideas with one another generously. Through these interactions, the students got to know one another. The online “coffee forum” was especially busy in this class. Sue felt inspired to continue on in her studies.
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BACKGROUND THEORY

What Is Invitational Theory?

The teaching approach and techniques that Sue’s instructor used was based on invitational theory, a model of professional practice developed by William Watson Purkey. Purkey (1992) used the word *invitational* to mean offering something valuable and summoning cordially. An invitation is an intentional and caring act of communication designed to offer something beneficial for consideration. “In invitational theory, everybody and everything adds to, or subtracts from, human existence. Ideally, the factors of people, places, policies, programs, and processes should be so intentionally inviting as to create a world where each individual is cordially summoned to develop physically, intellectually, and emotionally” (Purkey, 1992, p. 12). The foundation of invitational theory is the belief that one person can be of benefit to others; in the educational context, this benefit usually accrues through an invitation to participate in the learning environment (Purkey & Novak, 1996). However, it is always the choice of the individual (the student) to accept or reject the invitation (Riner, 2010).

The core assumption of invitational theory is that the learning environment affects students’ learning (Haigh, 2008). People, places, policies, programs, and processes, the five pillars upon which pedagogy is constructed, provide a framework for assessing inviting practices (Haigh, 2011; Schmidt, 2007). Manipulating these pillars, according to Riner (2010), potentially influences student success. In 2010, Shaw and Siegel created invitational theory and practice (ITP), which combines various aspects and elements of invitational theory to create a comprehensive framework. Schmidt (2007) notes that “invitational education” is essentially an inclusive model of communication and human relations.
Foundations of Invitational Theory

Democracy

Purkey and Novak (2008) explain that democracy is a social ideal founded on a belief that people are important, that they have potential to evolve, and that self-governance is appropriate. Democracy in education includes purposeful dialogue, mutual respect, and participation in shared activities. In other words, in a democratic learning environment, individuals work together to co-create the ethical character and social practices of the learning milieu and learners are involved in decisions that affect them. Participants act responsibly. Teachers “do with” rather than “do to” students. For example, rather than talk about a teacher “empowering” students, which implies a “doing to” approach in which the teacher performs an action directed at students (the power resides with the teacher, who then bestows it on students), invitational theory uses the neutral noun empowerment (Schmidt, 2007). A democratic class is one in which student innovation and creativity is valued and encouraged and learning is a shared experience.

Schmidt (2007) emphasizes the role that encouragement plays in a democratic environment. Encouragement aligns with the fundamental philosophy of “being with” rather than “doing to” (p. 20). According to Schmidt, praise is not the same as encouragement: while praise is somewhat superficial and produces short-term effects, encouragement comes from a genuine commitment or authenticity and produces long-lasting results.

Perception

Invitational theory is rooted in the belief that student behaviour is determined by student perception. Because our view of the world influences our behaviour, that view is our blueprint for action.
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Through our perceptions (based on our experiences and knowledge), we draw conclusions and make decisions (Schmidt, 2007). We develop our views based on present and past experiences (Purkey & Novak, 2008). Schmidt (2007) emphasizes that the invitational approach “embraces, celebrates, and honors diversity” in the educational milieu, since everyone’s perceptions are unique (p. 16).

SELF-CONCEPT

Self-concept, the beliefs that individuals hold about themselves, influences behaviour and capacity (Purkey & Novak, 2008). Since invitational theory proposes that positive self-concept is vital to successful learning (Riner, 2003), invitational approaches focus on helping students to enhance their self-concept. Teachers who practice from an invitational theory stance, realizing that the self-concept is fragile, behave “gently, appropriately, and with great care when asking others to change course, accept challenges, learn new information, and make positive contributions to the larger group” (Schmidt, 2007, p. 21).

Assumptions of Invitational Theory

Three basic interdependent assumptions underlie invitational theory. First, invitational theory assumes that students are able, valuable, and capable of self-direction, and should be treated accordingly (Purkey, 1992, p. 5). Second, process is as important as the outcome or product. Cooperative and collaborative alliances in learning environments are important elements of process. Third, humans possess untapped potential, and educational programs should be intentionally designed to help people reach this potential (Purkey & Novak, 2008).
The Four Central Values of Invitational Theory

The values that invitational theory embraces are trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality in the educational environment (Purkey, 1992). Trust includes reliability, consistency, dependability, personal authenticity, and truthfulness in the thoughts, behaviours, and beliefs of participants in the educational community (Purkey & Novak, 2008). In a trusting relationship, participants recognize each other as interdependent and as the authorities on their own best way of being and becoming.

Respect is based on the recognition that people are able, valuable, and responsible, and that people should be treated as such. An invitational environment is respectful when this is acknowledged. Respect is closely linked with the value of care, which, in this context, is concern expressed warmly for the well-being of others (Shaw & Siegel, 2010, p. 108). Respect is made manifest in the acknowledgement of each individual’s independence of thought (Riner, 2010). Invitational educational approaches do not use coercion.

According to Purkey (1992), optimism is a chosen perspective or outlook on the world and on people and is based on the underlying goal of positive outcomes. Optimism is based on the assumption that human potential has no limits.

Finally, intentionality means that teachers deliberately create and offer invitational environments (Purkey, 1992). An invitational educational milieu is created when optimism, trust, and respect (which includes care) are intentionally cultivated. These essential values of invitational theory—trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality—offer a means through which humans can create and maintain optimally inviting learning environments.
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Ways of Functioning in Invitational Theory

According to invitational theory, instructors can function in four different modes: intentionally inviting, intentionally disinviting, unintentionally inviting, or unintentionally disinviting. Educators can unintentionally create disinviting environments by inadvertently exhibiting a lack of trust, respect, and optimism. Conversely, environments can be unintentionally inviting when trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality are serendipitously present, rather than being consciously created. When instructors function in an intentionally inviting manner, they consistently and purposefully exhibit the four central values of invitational theory, whereas when those values are deliberately withheld, the result is an intentionally disinviting atmosphere.

INTENTIONALLY INVITING

Teachers and course designers can generally create effective educational environments by being intentionally inviting. According to Purkey (1992), intentionally inviting educators treat learners as individuals, develop trust through honesty in interactions, behave ethically, maintain an optimistic perspective, sustain energy and enthusiasm, and keep high expectations. Purkey concludes that invitational theory “carries the basic message that human potential, while not always evident, is always there, waiting to be discovered and invited forth” (1992, p. 15). Purkey and Novak (2008) argue that invitational approaches in education “significantly increase” this human potential.

Research has demonstrated that inviting educational environments have positive implications for learners. Cook (2005) found that when clinical nursing faculty intentionally created an invitational milieu, student anxiety decreased. By using invitational theory to create what they called “invitational education,” Stanley, Juhnke,
and Purkey (2004) were able to enhance school culture, improve academic achievement, and help stakeholders view concerns as symptoms rather than causes. In another study (Hunter and Smith, 2007), invitational education was applied to high school art classes, resulting in a more positive learning environment for students and teachers. Chant, Moes, and Ross (2009) found that including the collaborative processes of invitational theory encouraged teacher creativity, and Thompson (2004) concluded that employing the philosophy of invitational education created a more welcoming climate. Paxton (2003) advocates the use of invitational theory principles in e-learning, noting that e-learning will only succeed if educators intentionally create environments that preserve dignity and encourage communication.

**Unintentionally Disinviting**

In unintentionally disinviting learning situations, accidental or unplanned behaviours can result in a less positive environment and limit learners’ potential and positive outcomes. For example, using an online environment to “throw information” at students with no opportunities for student interaction can be experienced as deeply disinviting (Paxton, 2003, p. 923). Paxton (2003) identifies some of the more common disinviting practices currently experienced by learners who are new to the e-learning environment and suggests practical ways in which online educators can make the environment more invitational. Some of these practices are an overwhelming amount of course material, learning activities that are irrelevant to the learning needs of the students, learning that occurs in isolation, one-way delivery of course content, and absence of opportunities for students to interact with one another and with the instructor regarding course materials.
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UNINTENTIONALLY INVITING

According to invitational theory, teachers may exhibit behaviours or create courses that students find inviting without deliberately setting out to do so, thus being unintentionally inviting (Shaw & Siegel, 2010). This can result in positive outcomes for both students and instructors; however, instructors may be left wondering why this occurred. Upon reflection, they may recognize possible reasons for success (such as behaviours that helped create an invitational milieu) and then use this knowledge to become intentionally inviting in future course offerings.

INTENTIONALLY DISINVITING

Intentionally disinviting learning situations are characterized by deliberate behaviours that seek to injure or disrupt positive outcomes of a learning experience and the potential of participants (Shaw & Siegel, 2010). This has possible negative consequences for all involved.

It follows that inviting or disinviting behaviours (whether intentional or not) can have two outcomes: “beneficial presence or lethal presence” (Shaw & Siegel, 2010, p. 109). Educators who adopt what Purkey (1992) calls an “inviting stance” employ behaviours and approaches that result in positive outcomes. An educator with an inviting stance understands and enacts the foundations, values, and assumptions that underpin invitational theory.

In summary, invitational theory (or invitational theory and practice) is a useful way to examine and understand how people, places, policies, processes, and programs influence positive outcomes in educational environments. At its best, invitational practice becomes invisible (Shaw & Siegel, 2010): that is, skilled practitioners of invitational theory integrate this inviting way of thinking and being so that it just becomes part of who they are. Inviting educators confront all situations (including difficult ones) with invitational attitudes.
and behaviours and, in doing so, have a positive and constructive approach to teaching. Shaw and Siegel (2010) call this “the plus factor.” Invitational theory provides online teachers and course designers with insight regarding elements that may enhance positive student outcomes.

Finally, Purkey reminds us that the learning should be enjoyed. Educators who subscribe to invitational theory look for opportunities to celebrate, enjoy others, and find good cheer. As Purkey writes, “How easy it is to overlook life’s joys” (2006, p. 99). Invitational theory gives us permission—in fact, it requires us—to seek the delight in teaching and learning.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES CONGRUENT WITH INVITATIONAL THEORY

This section describes practical teaching activities and techniques that online educators can use in course design and instruction to create more invitational educational environments. These practices are organized according to the values that underlie invitational theory—trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality.

Developing Trust

Trust is important in developing effective interpersonal relationships among students in online classes (Wade, Cameron, Morgan, & Williams, 2011). While trust is often described as essential to positive relationships, a common understanding of trust is elusive. We view trust as a multifaceted, fragile, emotional, interpersonal phenomenon that is fundamental to human interaction (Andrei, Oțoiu, Isailă, & Băban, 2010). Trust is dynamic: not only does it provide a basis for a
relationship, but it is also shaped by the relationship (Nootenboom, 2006).

Trust develops over time. As an online course progresses, members of the class (students and instructor) become known to one another. If participants discover commonalities and develop positive regard for one another, they may begin to trust. Trust also develops when groups work on tasks that create interdependence (Andrei et al., 2010). Some teaching activities have the development of trust as a primary goal. With others, the development of trust is a corollary outcome. Teaching practices that may have a positive influence on trust in the online classroom are described in detail below, and instructors are encouraged to adapt these practices according to their students’ needs and interests.

“Me to You” YouTube Videos

When we teach in face-to-face classrooms, we have the opportunity in each class to greet the students, offer them a short update regarding how we see the class progressing, give a brief overview of key points covered in the last class, and perhaps offer a word of encouragement. Online teachers can achieve a similar effect with “Me to You” videos.

As the name suggests, “Me to You” videos are personalized for each class. The “me” is the course instructor and the “you” is the members of that particular section of the course. Because the videos are unique to each offering of a course, they need to be prepared by (and feature the face of) the course teacher. Optimally, a new video is offered at the start of each unit of a course. Furthermore, if the videos are made “fresh” each time a course is offered, the instructor can personalize the message for that specific group of learners.

To be most effective, the videos are largely unscripted: that is, the instructor just chats to the class in an informal voice, preferably with a warm and inviting conversational tone. Since part of the goal of
this strategy is to have the instructor seem real to the learners, it is effective to create the videos in the teacher’s office space, the physical place where he or she may be interacting with students online. One professor sits in her home office to record her videos; in the background, students see a wall of textbooks, family photos, and other personal effects. When these videos are shared throughout the course, they become concrete evidence that the instructor is participating in the course. “Me to You” videos may help to enhance the feeling that the instructor is engaged with students in their learning journey and to mitigate the sense of isolation that students tend to feel in online courses (Revere & Kovach, 2011).

Through the visual and auditory contact of “Me to You” videos, the instructor becomes known to the learners. Nonverbal clues to the instructor’s personality may become evident, and some of the instructor’s personal life (hobbies, family, values) may be shared appropriately through what the students see on the screen. The students thus get to know more about the instructor, which facilitates the development of trust, a foundation for the invitational classroom.

Making and sharing a YouTube video is as easy as sitting in front of a webcam and pressing record. Information about this process is available online: see, for example, http://www.youtube.com/t/creators_corner or http://www.ehow.com/how_2036208_youtube-video.html.

The “Me to You” videos are short, about two minutes in length. They are greetings, not lectures. The first video in a course may be the most important, since students will make an instant assessment based on first impressions. A genuinely engaging welcome from the instructor can help create a convivial atmosphere. If the initial “Me to You” video is awaiting learners when they first log in to their course, it can be the first step toward an invitational environment and the establishment of trust.
From the Field: A Warm Introduction with a Personal Touch

Carol Anderson writes a warm, personalized introductory email to each student to help establish trust in the student-instructor relationship. Beginning with students’ names, she welcomes them and outlines her expectations of them and what they can expect from her as their instructor. She also lets them know the best time to contact her. She is always available during the specified time and responds quickly to emails to help build trust.

Carol includes comments about the makeup of the class to give students some idea of who is participating in the course and to paint a picture of the group: for example, she may describe the age range, geographical distribution, and academic experience of the students. She also includes her own profile in an attachment. Her introduction sets the tone for the upcoming interactions.

Generally, students have provided very positive feedback about Carol’s introduction. One student wrote, “The instructor set the tone for the course in her introduction. Expectations and ground rules were set out.” Another said, “Carol’s initial comments made a significant impression upon me. They set the stage for an open, approachable and supportive environment that continued to grow.” And yet another described Carol as being “extremely professional” and as having “a sense of warmth” and a “great virtual presence.”
**PhotoVoice**

PhotoVoice allows course participants to share their values, biases, hobbies, interests, and personalities with the class. In doing so, they become better known to one another, enabling the development of trust within the class community.

PhotoVoice originated as a participatory action research method. Specifically, Wang and Burris (1997) used photographs to elicit responses from study participants on issues related to their health and community needs. Through this research method, participants, regardless of their literacy levels, were enabled to reflect and effectively communicate their perceptions and insights (Wang, 1999).

Perry (2006) transformed the photoVoice research method into an online teaching technique. The instructor posts a different digital photographic image at the beginning of each unit of an online course. Each purposefully selected image is accompanied by a reflective question. Students are encouraged to view the photograph, consider the question, and contribute to an online discussion forum provided for each photoVoice activity. The photoVoice activity is optional and ungraded. Figure 1 offers an example of a photoVoice activity used in a course on organizational change.

Students’ photoVoice responses often reveal something about them that may not be as easily shared in traditional discussion forums. For example, in responding to the photoVoice shown in figure 1, one student, noticing the garden in the photo, commented as part of her response that her hobby was gardening. Others in the class shared this interest and connections were established around this hobby. The “coffee forum” (a forum established for informal conversations unrelated to the course) became very active as this subgroup of the class exchanged gardening tips. Eventually, these students formed a working group and made an excellent presentation to the class on a course theme. Their shared interest, discovered through the photoVoice activity, may have helped to establish trust among group
members, thereby preparing them to work together effectively as a team on course work.

![Image of a fence]

**Figure 1.** Example of a photovoice.

Photovoice also provides a means by which instructor presence is established and maintained throughout a course. If the photovoice images and questions are provided at the beginning of each unit, students may log on to the course regularly to see what new image has been posted. In a study of the effect of photovoice on student engagement, one student commented, “I couldn’t wait to see what would be revealed behind that virtual paperclip,” referring to the digital image and reflective question that awaited the class each week (Perry & Edwards, 2010). Furthermore, since the instructor chooses and shares the images, the themes portrayed disclose something about the teacher. For example, in the same study by Perry and Edwards (2010), one student noted, “Looking at the images was like visiting the professor’s home . . . it was like looking through the professor’s art collection.” This student came to know through the photovoice images
that the professor liked nature, enjoyed gardening, and had a fondness for flowers. The student noted that this experience made the professor “real” to her in a virtual world. When course participants become more real to one another, trust may develop more easily.

As a variation on the photovoice activity, students could take on the role of choosing and posting the photovoice images and reflective questions. This would give them the opportunity to share their own photographs and would encourage them to get to know the topic well enough to develop a meaningful reflective question.

From the Field: Photovoice in a Qualitative Research Course

Sharon Moore uses a variation of photovoice in her advanced qualitative research course. To introduce each topic in the course, she combines a photograph with a quotation to tie the image to the concept on which she is focusing. The image is used as a visual introduction to the unit of study.

For example, the first unit of the research methods course that Sharon designed begins with a photograph of a path accompanied by a quotation by Tsukiyama (1994) that reads: “Even if you walk the same path a hundred times, you will see something new each time.” The text of the study guide refers to the fact that although students may have studied qualitative approaches in the past, this course will encourage them to go deeper in their understanding of why one particular methodology might be chosen over another one.

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Sharon uses this teaching technique to link an artistic pedagogical tool to a concept. The photograph appeals to a different sense and adds another component to an online print-based course.

GROUP PROJECTS: CRACKER BARREL COLLABORATIONS

As noted earlier, trust may develop as class participants work together interdependently on a task or project. The nature of the group project will vary depending on the topic, group responsibilities, products required, number of group members, and selection process for forming groups. To effectively promote trust, the group project needs to be challenging, require contributions from all group members, and have a collaborative or interdependent element required for success. The Cracker Barrel group project meets these requirements.

The activity takes its name from the cracker barrels found in old country stores, around which customers used to gather and chat. In a Cracker Barrel session, a group of about five students (assigned to the group by the instructor) make a 15-minute presentation on a key issue or question about a course topic using a meeting platform such as Adobe Connect. (Sessions may be audio only or use video as well, depending on the technological options available.) Following the presentation, the group members lead a 30-minute roundtable discussion on the topic with the entire class. Sessions occur in real time but can be recorded for those who cannot be present at the scheduled time.
Students in each group collaborate to prepare the presentation and to lead the roundtable discussion on the topic. The scoring rubric gives credit for evidence that all members of the group participated in both of these aspects of the Cracker Barrel session.

As a follow-up to this activity, students may be asked to write a brief paper (about two pages, double-spaced) in which they reflect on the collaborative processes used by the group and on what they learned about collaboration. The reflection paper may include references to related theory.

Promoting Respect

Literature related to effective teaching, including effective online instruction, frequently mentions the importance of respect. Participants in the online educational milieu (teachers and students) need to treat one another with respect if effective relationships are to develop and optimal learning is to occur. Respect is more than “nice to have.” Respect is essential for establishing an invitational learning environment.

As Cohen (2001) points out, respect is a sentiment that one person has with regard to another: it implies two people. Palmer-Jones and Hoerdtcoerfer (2008, p. 3) argues that respect is “both a way of behaving and a way of feeling,” one that implies “consideration,” that is, the action of taking the other person’s feelings into account, and “esteem,” that is, an emotional orientation. These authors all note that respect is often a mutual and reciprocal experience. Frijda (1986) summarizes respectful action as “treating others as you want to be treated.”

A Respectful Communication Style

Respect begins with the very first communiqué that the instructor shares with the class or with a student. The beginning seeds of respect,
which will potentially blossom into a mutually respectful relationship, are carried in the tone, structure, content, and word choice of the instructor’s first posting or email. For example, does the email or posting begin with a greeting? An effective face-to-face teacher entering a physical classroom on day one would not launch into instructions regarding the course without first giving a friendly greeting or welcome. Respectful emails and postings that are perceived as invitational have both a warm greeting and a parting phrase such as “over to you” or “all the best.” These salutations demonstrate and engender respect in the online learning milieu.

The language used in online correspondence is also important in communicating respect for students. Messages that are positive, use inclusive language, and are shared with an appropriate audience all communicate respect. With regard to positive language, some words have a more uplifting feeling than others. For example, “I would be delighted” sounds more enthusiastic and positive than “Okay, I will do that.” The instruction “Glance through the article to find ideas that are relevant to your experience” is more encouraging than “Read the article.” Using inclusive language also connotes respect: using “we,” for example, includes the teacher in the learning community. Careful word choices can make typed words (and the online teacher) come alive to students and can help ensure that the humanness of online messaging is not lost. In part, this is achieved through using words that convey emotions such as caring, compassion, concern, joy, excitement, or interest.

Taking care to send messages through appropriate channels and to the right audiences demonstrates an awareness of how others would like to be treated. For example, feedback specific to a student should be shared through private communication channels to avoid causing the student any public embarrassment. This thoughtful and careful direction of messages is another sign of respect that online instructors can role-model through their communication style and techniques.
JOIN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

A community of practice (CoP) is a group of individuals who share a concern, interest, or passion and who interact regularly with a focus on this commonality. A CoP is made up of three components: the domain, the community, and the practice (Wenger, 1998). Examples of CoPs include a group of painters seeking new forms of expression, a group of scientists working on a similar problem, and a group of first-year nurses helping each other to cope with the stresses of academic life.

A simple effective learning activity involves inviting students to seek out a CoP that relates to their professional interests. Students join this CoP, participate over several weeks, and then share their experiences and reflections with their classmates in a conference forum.

The CoP learning activity accomplishes several learning outcomes. Students discover and become involved in CoPs that might be helpful to them during and after the course. In order to share their experiences with their classmates, students need to reflect on their experiences in the CoP and consolidate their thoughts into a succinct posting, thus gaining experience communicating online with others who share their interests.

The CoP learning activity helps to build respect in the online learning environment, in part because students are exposed to diverse opinions expressed in the CoP. This exposure to others who have similar interests but bring different perspectives to the larger discussion develops awareness of the synergy that can result from variety. When students share their reflections with their class, this observation is often expressed as part of the insight they gain from this learning activity.

As a variation on the CoP activity, students can join a discussion blog on a topic of professional interest. The instructor can encourage students to discover a relevant blog on their own or can direct them to a specific blog. One advantage to having all students join the same
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blog is that their individual reflections posted on the course forum will be based on common experiences.

Enhancing Optimism

People often choose to cultivate an optimistic outlook because they believe it will lead to positive outcomes. According to Purkey (1992), optimistic individuals embrace the belief that human potential is limitless. The invitational education environment depends on the optimism of the teacher and on the development of optimistic attitudes in students. The teacher is often the catalyst for enhancing a tone of optimism in the classroom and for the development of optimistic attitudes. Some online learning activities may aid the teacher in this goal.

Moment at the Movies

For this activity, the teacher provides students with links to clips from inspiring movies related to the course content. For example, in a course on effective education, excerpts from movies such as *Dead Poets Society* or *Mr. Holland’s Opus* or from television series such as *Glee* can be used to illustrate exemplary educators who inspire optimism in others. Students watch the clips and share their observations in response to a specific reflection question (provided by the teacher) in an online discussion forum. The reflection question can be as simple as “How did X inspire students?” Often students bring in their own examples of movies or television shows that they found inspiring, furthering the breadth and depth of the discussion.

Other course topics will require different movie or television clips. These examples are easily located. For example, searching the Internet for “movies about nurses” provides a list of movies with insights and themes useful to nursing students, including *MASH, Florence Nightingale, Miss Evers’ Boys*, and *Wit*. 
The “Moment at the Movie” learning activity usually results in a class discussion in which students express pride in their chosen profession and indicate that they are inspired to excel in their field. Furthermore, the tone of the discussion is optimistic: that is, they can and will succeed.

**Music**

Because music can be a source of inspiration, using music in online teaching is another way to increase the optimism felt by the class community. One of the many ways to include music in an online course is choosing a theme song. This “anthem” can be linked into the course at strategic points such as the beginning and end of the course as a whole, at the beginning of units or major sections, or at particularly stressful moments such as an assignment deadline or an exam. Not all learners will find music inspiring, but the link to the course theme song provides students with the option to play the song if they find it helpful.

Choosing appropriate music is essential to success of this strategy. Often, an instrumental selection is best, since lyrics can be distracting and can also be misinterpreted. The tone and tempo of the selection needs to be spirited and engaging without being too aggressive. The fact that people often have powerful emotional responses to music is what makes this an effective strategy, but it also opens up the possibility of a negative response. For example, a tune that most people find positive and uplifting might trigger memories of a death or a break-up in a few individuals. The trick is to find a musical selection that is fairly neutral but stops short of being insipid “elevator” music, and this requires skill on the part of the teacher. The instructor in a class on teacher education used “Destiny,” an instrumental piece from Peter Kind’s album *The Fallen Angel* (available at [https://www.jamendo.com/en/track/1001530/destiny](https://www.jamendo.com/en/track/1001530/destiny)). With its sprightly, uplifting beat, it inspired feelings of optimism in most of the class participants.
There are also copyright issues to consider when using music in online courses. Copyright administrators at an instructor’s institution can help to ensure that protocol is not breached. Although many online music sources, such as jamando.com, state that they are copyright and royalty free, copyright issues may still exist and the necessary steps must be taken to ensure that the music is being used appropriately.

Students can be encouraged to select the course music through group consensus, or individual students can choose the course music for one unit or section of the course. Consensus decision making encourages team building and effective conflict resolution. When individual students contribute music selections, they have the opportunity to share something about themselves with the group: their choices often come with a story or background explanation, which facilitates community building. Both variations have pedagogical advantages.

Another way to include music in an online course is to encourage students to listen to baroque music while studying and writing their reflections or scholarly papers. Instructors can provide links to online baroque music such as http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mURZQNpKiLQ or http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVAcLaNGZv4. Research demonstrates that listening to baroque music while studying can enhance learning and concentration (Esman, 2011). This is, in part, attributed to the lively and engaging quality of baroque music, which is experienced by many as uplifting. Music that is carefully chosen, offered as an option rather than an imposition, and skillfully integrated into an online course can fuel a sense of optimism in the class community.

**Cartoon Analysis**

Often referred to colloquially as “the best medicine,” laughter lifts us up and energizes individuals and groups. Although this applies
to online courses as well, sharing laughter and humour online can be a challenge, especially if only written methods are used. Using video in online classes adds to the effectiveness of humour because nonverbal cues are often essential to humour. Online instructors can take deliberate steps to integrate humour into courses in order to raise the optimism of the group. One way to do this is to use cartoon analysis.

For this activity, students are asked to seek out cartoons on a course topic, keeping in mind that valuable lessons can often be found in cartoon humour. Teachers can provide students with current links to cartoon sites as a starting point. After they find a course-related cartoon that appeals to their sense of humour, they text or email another class member to share their cartoon and explain what they learned from it. This helps to develop relationships between students in the course. As a variation, the students' sharing can be done in a course forum for all the class to see and respond to.

Demonstrate Caring

In invitational learning environments, learners sense that the instructor views each person as a valued member of the community of learners. Students feel that the instructor has a genuine interest in them. This is demonstrated by the instructor’s willingness to provide them with individualized feedback and personalized learning opportunities. In part, invitational instructors show that they care about students by being present in the online course, providing frequent posts, responding promptly to student questions, giving substantive feedback on postings and assignments, and distributing and returning assignments in a timely manner. In addition to these basic approaches, the techniques that follow demonstrate an instructor’s care and might be incorporated into online courses.
**From the Field: Being There!**

Joyce Springate uses an online teaching approach that she calls “Being there!” Joyce wants students to know that she believes in their abilities and their desire to complete the program, so she tries to “hear” what they are asking or saying in each posting. She responds to their concerns as quickly as possible. If the postings are well done, Joyce gives personalized feedback that will encourage more of the same. If students are having difficulties related to health, family, or work, Joyce does whatever she can to help and encourage them. She usually offers an extension to give students some deadline flexibility when they are facing extreme stressors. While Joyce keeps her responses and messages to students as short and clear as possible, she expresses compassion and patience in her communiqués with students to minimize misunderstandings and to convey her care about them and their learning.

**Reflective or Parallel Poetry**

Emotion is difficult to convey online, but poems provide a vehicle for sharing feelings within the limitation of words. Reflective or parallel poetry is useful as a teaching tool both in helping students to achieve learning outcomes in the affective domain that may involve a change in attitudes or beliefs and in helping learners and instructors to express feelings and emotional experiences.

In parallel poetry, the instructor provides an example poem on a topic related to the course content. Haikus, odes, limericks, and
narrative and couplet poems have been used successfully for this artistic pedagogical technology. The example poem is usually written by the instructor, although a published poem can be used if its theme corresponds with the course content. Students are invited to create their own poem (a parallel poem) after reading the example poem. The poem written by the student is to parallel the structure of the demonstration poem and reflect a specified course theme. The following is an example of a teacher-constructed poem and a student’s parallel poem on the topic of caring.

Teacher Poem

_On Caring . . ._

It is difficult
To put into precise words,
What it means to care.
Is it giving, not taking?
Is it listening, not talking?
Is it bending, not standing strong?

Student Poem

_On Caring . . ._

What does it mean to care?
It is giving and taking, at just the right moments.
It is listening and talking, in perfect balance.
It is bending and standing strong, strong enough for two.

Poems are effective teaching strategies in part because writers need to understand a topic in order to write a poem about it. According to van Manen (1990), poetry is the perfect medium for giving voice to
abstract and complex topics such as human interaction. Additional examples of such topics are compassion, human connection, motivation, inspiration, and caring, topics that are often part of nursing and other human services curricula. As van Manen (1990) notes, poems help to expose the tacit and unspoken within the limitation of words. Poems have the potential to communicate the essence of topics that are difficult to write about, including personal beliefs, values, and philosophies.

Since the poem that is to be paralleled by the students is written or chosen by the instructor, it gives learners insight into that instructor’s values, priorities, and attitudes. In this way, the parallel poetry activity is also a technique through which instructors share themselves with students. It offers the opportunity for students to come to know their instructor as a caring, compassionate person.

PHOTOSTORIES AND AUDIO CASTS

Opportunities for students to get to know their online instructors are often limited. Although a photo of an instructor may accompany each posting in a course forum, the teacher may not become as animated and real to learners as face-to-face instructors are. In order to create an invitational educational milieu, it is important for online teachers to find ways to disclose appropriate personality attributes and personal details to learners to reveal that they are caring individuals. In face-to-face teaching, students hear the instructor’s voice, see how instructors dress and present themselves, and often hear personal details integrated into class discussions or during shared breaks. All of these experiences help learners to know their teachers at an appropriate personal level. To achieve this level of intimacy online, teachers can use self-disclosure through a photostory or an audio cast.

A photostory, which is a combination of images and voice, can be created using PowerPoint with voiceover narration or other open-source software programs. The most important consideration in
creating a photostory is to include images of the instructor and of activities or topics of interest to him or her. The voice on the photostory is that of the instructor. An effective photostory is short (less than five minutes) and is generally posted early in the course. It can be accompanied by a written posting conveying that it is being provided as an opportunity for students to get to know the instructor in a more personal way.

A variation on the photostory is an audio cast in which instructors record a short biography for the students using a friendly, informal tone. The instructor provides some interesting details about his or her interest and expertise in the course topic and welcomes students to the course. Like the photostory, the audio cast is uploaded near the beginning of the course as part of the instructor’s welcome.

**Demonstrating Intentionality**

In order to facilitate effective learning, online instructors need to deliberately create an invitational environment: that is, an educational environment that is perceived as optimistic and rooted in a sense of trust, respect, and caring. Using any of the teaching techniques outlined in this chapter can demonstrate that the instructor believes in the importance of an invitational environment is taking action to create such a learning environment. The key message is this—an invitational learning environment requires deliberate intervention on the part of the online instructor. While a disinviting learning environment can occur without teacher intervention, an inviting learning environment requires an ongoing cycle of assessment, planning, intervention, and evaluation of the learners, learning needs, and effectiveness of teaching strategies throughout the duration of the course.
CONCLUSION

Instructors with an invitational attitude, an interest in creating an online learning environment that students perceive as invitational, and a willingness to deliberately choose teaching strategies and techniques that facilitate this experience may have “the plus factor” (Shaw & Siegel, 2010). The plus factor attitude and approach to online teaching can have important benefits for learners: they may be more engaged in the learning experience and achieve learning outcomes more successfully. The first step in becoming a plus factor online educator is gaining an awareness of invitational learning theory and teaching practices that bring this theory to life and that intentionally facilitate trust, respect, and optimism in the online classroom. The theory and ideas presented in this chapter provide a foundation for online teachers in a variety of courses and disciplines to develop and adapt additional teaching activities to achieve this.

REFERENCES


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