

## 9. The Learner Who “Listened”

Though we had agreed to use Skype for our interview, Angie had requested that we not use video during our conversation. I was happy to extend that accommodation, and her reasons for this request became clear during our interview. Those reasons illustrate that there are valuable ways to learn beyond class participation and that accommodate learners’ needs.

Living in the United Kingdom and in her early forties, Angie was reticent to share much about her employment or other background, noting that her work related to law enforcement and that she wasn’t able to tell me much more about it. Sensing her desire to hold back on personal details, I quickly transitioned our conversation into the online course she was currently taking. These three general bits of self-reported information (age, location, and employment at the time) are all that I know about Angie as far as demographics are concerned.

The course that Angie was enrolled in included collaborative activities and opportunities to interact with instructional staff, such as a vibrant discussion board. Angie elected not to

participate and, in fact, was pleased that interaction with others was an optional aspect of the course. This became clear when I asked her to describe to me any difficulties she faced in the course. “I wouldn’t call them difficulties,” she said reluctantly, “Basically, I’m very introverted, and for me, it’s difficult communicating with other people. So, I’m not able to discuss different things, like on forums with other people, because I’m losing focus. I prefer to learn on my own without discussing anything. It’s something that I’d like to work on.”

In wanting to learn more about her participation in the course, I asked what she would do if she did not understand materials that were assigned in the course. She paused. Eventually she said, “If I don’t understand, I just . . . Nothing I can do about it. I usually, I just continue to do the work, and . . . I try to understand only what I’m able to understand.” Sometimes in interviews it helps to provide examples to people to clarify a question. I, therefore, told Angie that other people I have interviewed talk to family members and ask questions or ask questions on the discussion board. “Do you do any of those things,” I inquired, “or perhaps something different?”

“Very rarely,” she said, “because of my introversion. When there are videos, I watch them twice, and I read the discussion forums. But when I talk to people, I get distracted.” She paused again. “And it’s a big challenge for me, even talking to you. For me, it requires a lot of effort.” It was my turn to pause. After a second or two, I expressed my appreciation for her time and effort, and for taking on what must have been an obstacle to have this conversation with me. She was very gracious in explaining that interactions with others don’t come easy for her, but that she was grateful to participate in a learning experience that did not require her to interact with others in significant ways. As far as her performance in the course?

She was on track to complete it successfully and found that it had immediate practical relevance to her personal and professional life.

By examining the course log data, I confirmed that Angie never contributed content to the course site: she neither posted on the discussion board, nor added comments on other parts of the course. For all practical purposes, it seemed as if Angie was a fly on the wall, reading materials, watching tutorials and videos, engaging individually with the course content without being seen or heard by anyone other than the course instructor. She was listening, creating, and learning in a non-public way.

...

As discussed in prior chapters, researchers generally agree that interactions among students and between students and instructors are integral to the quality of online learning, and emerging forms of online pedagogy have, therefore, emphasized and encouraged learner participation and active engagement. To that end, online courses often require students to demonstrate their participation in visible ways, typically through contributions to discussion posts and so on. Lack of participation is widely considered a problem and is often described with the pejorative term *lurking*. Lack of participation may be an indicator that learners are facing challenges that prevent them from participating fully, are disengaged, are having troubles with the content of the course, or are otherwise falling behind. And the longer the inactivity lasts, the more challenging it may be for learners to catch up. In short, students who engage with the material are more likely to succeed. Full participation, Selwyn (2010) argues, is necessary for learning, imperative even, and especially so for certain populations such as younger students. Other researchers highlight

further problems with lurking: Rovai (2000) considers lurking to negatively impact community-building and White (2015) argues that such behavior is often associated with “voyeurism and surveillance.” Understandably, instructors, administrators, and researchers may be concerned when lurking reflects social loafing. Social loafing is the situation in which some people exert less effort to achieve a goal when they are in social situations, such as social and collaborative learning environments, than when they are alone. This is a problem because it may place a burden on some students to participate, may lead to lower achievement for groups of people working together, and may limit diversity of thought.

For all these reasons, the literature is replete with recommendations to discourage the type of behavior referred to as lurking and encourage active participation in online courses, all tackling a variety of perceived problems surrounding lack of participation, ranging from suggestions to create more engaging activities, develop a warm course community, explicitly state expectations, and incentivize participation through assigning grades to discussion board posts. The quintessential online learning activity that invites students to write a response to a prompt posted by the instructor followed by two replies to peers’ responses reflects this exact idea, underpinned by the assumption that participation is worthwhile, interaction with others is valuable, and that participation and interaction can be encouraged through a structured approach to learning design.

The behavior that is often referred to as *lurking*, however, is not necessarily always a problem. For one, the term is pejorative. Instead of using the term lurking, some researchers have proposed alternative terms: Crawford (2009) suggests “listening” and Nonnecke and Preece (2003) recommend

“non-public participation.” Angie wasn’t engaging in voyeurism and surveillance. She was listening and participating in ways that weren’t publicly visible, in ways that made her feel comfortable. As several researchers have pointed out, to understand whether participating in this way is problematic, and to explore whether there may in fact be benefits for learners engaging in “silent” participation, it is important to understand the reasons why students choose to engage in these ways (e.g., Dennen 2008; Honeychurch, Bozkurt, Singh, and Koutropoulos 2017). In particular, the broader literature on lurking, shows that individuals lurk for a wide range of reasons (e.g., environmental and personal factors) and that, unlike broader assumptions that underpin beliefs about lack of participation, most lurkers are *not* selfishly taking advantage of discussions without contributing (Preece, Nonnecke, and Andrews 2004; Sun, Rau, and Ma 2014).

Engaging in “listening” or other nonpublic participatory behaviors online may not necessarily indicate lack of engagement or learning. After all, social learning theorists have long posited that a significant way in which people learn is through modeling the behavior of others, through observing and imitating others (Bandura 1971). In an examination of the various invisible ways in which some learners engage in online courses, and drawing on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of *communities of practice*, Honeychurch, Bozkurt, Singh, and Koutropoulos (2017) conceptualized lurkers as learners perched on the periphery of a community. These individuals learn online even when platforms and instructors are not able to identify or see their activities (Veletsianos, Collier, and Schneider 2015). For instance, some students in the aforementioned study described collaborating with other students outside the class platform on social media and in face-to-face spaces. White (2015) argues

that these learners are not simply freeloading or loafing but critically evaluating the discourse in their field and waiting until they feel more confident before actively contributing, thereby moving from “knowledge-consumer to active community member” and reaching “the point at which they are exploring their ‘voice’ within the discourse.” According to this view, these “silent” learners are simply attempting to understand, through observation and modeling from other participants, how the online community engages with one another. White thus reminds us that some learners prefer slow, purposeful, and timely participation rather than immediate participation, and thus the lack of public participation shouldn’t automatically be considered a problem and perhaps it ought not to be discouraged. To this end, White coins the term *elegant lurking* to reflect a sort of graceful engagement with content that shuns the disturbing vibe that the term lurking seems to entail.

Even though the literature on online learning emphasizes active and visible participation, it is imperative to balance this emphasis with a recognition that there are other, and perhaps just as valuable and vital, ways to learn. Doing so recognizes the diversity of our students, enables us to be more inclusive, and perhaps even offers us an opportunity to explore pedagogical approaches that aren’t focused on participation and public forms of interaction. As Dennen (2008, 1626) has pointed out, “The online class lurker has a corollary in classroom-based instruction, namely the student who sits silently throughout class session—and may even look bored—but who performs well on assessments.” She found that students who took more time to read through other students’ messages before posting themselves tended to find the discussion activity more worthwhile than students who read less before posting. This finding

supports the conclusion that posting behavior alone may not always accurately reflect students' level of interest and engagement.

These scholars' work suggests that online course designers and instructors need to consider that visible public participation is only one form of engagement. Coupled with the recognition that learners intentionally and unintentionally engage in many activities that are invisible to both instructors and digital learning platforms, the solution isn't to attempt to make visible every interaction with content and every activity that occurs in the course of learning. Rather, we should approach learning with the diversity it deserves and consider how learners who are reticent to participate in public fora—or learners who, for whatever reason are *listening* rather than *talking*—are supported in their learning endeavors. One way to do so may be to provide choices for learners to decide how, when, and to what extent they'd like to engage with others. I explore this topic further in chapter 16.

...

- Lurking is widely perceived as problematic as it may be both an indicator of challenges learners face (e.g., disengagement) and may lead to additional problems (e.g., undue burden on others to contribute).
- Lurking, however, may not be an accurate description of one's behavior. For instance, learners may be "listening" or participating in ways that are not visible to the digital platform or to the instructor. Framed in this way, nonpublic participation may be a valid learning approach.
- The online learning literature emphasizes participation and interaction, but it may be worthwhile to consider that there are other, perhaps just as valuable and vital, ways to learn.

## References

- Bandura, A. 1971. *Psychological Modelling: Conflicting Theories*. Chicago: Aldine-Atherton.
- Crawford, K. 2009. "Following You: Disciplines of Listening in Social Media." *Continuum* 23 (4): 525-535.
- Dennen, V. P. 2008. "Pedagogical Lurking: Student Engagement in Non-posting Discussion Behavior." *Computers in Human Behavior* 24 (4): 1624-1633.
- Honeychurch, S., Bozkurt, A., Singh, L., and Koutropoulos, A. 2017. "Learners on the Periphery: Lurkers as Invisible Learners." *European Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning* 20 (1): 192-212. <https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/j/eurodl.2017.20.issue-1/eurodl-2017-0012/eurodl-2017-0012.pdf>.
- Lave, J., and Wenger, E. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Nonnecke, B., and Preece, J. 2003. "Silent Participants: Getting to Know Lurkers Better." In *From Usenet to CoWebs: Interacting with Social Information Spaces*, edited by C. Leug and D. Fisher, 110-132. London: Springer.
- Preece, J., Nonnecke, B., and Andrews, D. 2004. "The Top Five Reasons for Lurking: Improving Community Experiences for Everyone." *Computers in Human Behavior* 20 (2): 201-223.
- Rovai, A. 2000. "Building and Sustaining Community in Asynchronous Learning Networks." *Internet and Higher Education* 3: 285-297.
- Selwyn, N. 2010. "The Educational Significance of Social Media: A Critical Perspective." Keynote debate at Ed-Media Conference 2010, Toronto, Canada, June 28, 2019. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/33693537/The-educational-significance-of-social-media-a-critical-perspective>.
- Sun, N., Rau, P. P. L., and Ma, L. 2014. "Understanding Lurkers in Online Communities: A Literature Review." *Computers in Human Behavior* 38: 110-117.
- White, D. 2015. "Elegant Lurking." *Digital Learning Culture* (blog), April 16. <http://daveowhite.com/elegant-lurking/>.
- Veletsianos, G., Collier, A., and Schneider, E. 2015. "Digging Deeper into Learners' Experience in MOOCs: Participation in Social Networks Outside of MOOCs, Notetaking, and Contexts Surrounding Content Consumption." *British Journal of Educational Technology* 46 (3): 570-587.