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## **Real, Virtual, and Other Personas in an Online Collaborative Environment**

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Information technologies bring in a set of special issues for evaluation [Baker and O'Neil 1994; Johnston 1984; Rice 1984]. Among these are technical characteristics of the technology, including collaborative tools, interface features, or hypertext structures. As use scales up, the new media reshape geography, through spatially dispersed contexts of use and variations in implementation. Thus, new modes of communication, whose effects modify with use, pose interesting challenges for understanding collaboration using these tools. At the same time, technology-based learning projects typically experience continual revision throughout their implementation, implying that we are effectively engaged in perpetual formative evaluation [Bruce and Rubin 1993].

This presentation reports on a study of an unusual online course, which incorporates collaboration across campuses in teaching about evaluation of information technologies. Issues raised by new information technologies are major foci within the course, and also entry points for our study of its implementation.

The course centers around the idea that the course community is an "evaluation center." Each case study team in the center has access to a suite of collaboration tools, as well as a shared folder on a server where members post commentaries and reflections on readings. In the virtual case study, the evaluation center has received a request by the National Education Foundation (NEF) to conduct an evaluation of an Illinois school district's "Learning with Computer Technologies" program. The final product is a collaborative publication entitled "Evaluation News." The newsletter contains section introductions by the center facilitators, videos, abstracts of center

member's project reports, team case study commentaries, and discussion group reading reflections.

We will describe the course design and the story of how it came into being. This includes an account of the redesign of the course for online learning, and reflections on the collaborations across campuses that have made the course possible. We will discuss the continuing evolution of the course web site in relation to its use by students and the special problems posed by the multiple real and virtual roles that participants play. The paper draws data from various sources, including ongoing student-instructor discussion and feedback, student work within and beyond the course website, summative evaluations by the students of their learning experiences and course technologies.

## **References**

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