EVALUATION
OF SUCCESS

Facilitating Online Learning has offered a theoretical framework and a practical guide to help you meet the challenges of starting and sustaining quality dialogue in online courses or working groups. The system of voices and critical-thinking strategies we've outlined here provides an effective and adaptable set of pathways for both analysis of dialogues and composition of interventions so that you can leverage more-focused or deepened attention toward the objectives of any virtual community.

Maybe you're excited by these ideas; or maybe you're interested in them but you want to reserve judgment until you've tried the techniques for yourself. In any case, before attempting these methods that support a "Guide on the Side" educational approach, you need to explore a key issue: How will you know if you're facilitating in this "Guide on the Side" manner well or poorly?

One indication that you are indeed functioning well as a "Guide on the Side" may be an uneasiness or a sense of your own placelessness in the community you're leading. While noting considerable assistance from a moderator training workshop and an online moderator discussion group, one moderator we worked with frequently wrote about an uncomfortable level of frustration in attempting to model the "Guide on the Side" approach:

> I know that I want to interact with students/participants in a (Guide on the Side) manner, but I'm having trouble figuring out how to do it. Am I one of the participants, or am I outside the group itself?

Other moderators have felt discouraged:

> I felt that I was invisible — that my carefully crafted postings
> were being ignored by the participants.

Some moderators have felt quite awkward in writing with a style that relies very heavily on quoting others' contributions and not adding their own ideas. Said one:

> It feels a bit like plagiarism. I'm citing others' words so often in
> my writing.

Other moderators have found the idea of writing with another voice intriguing, but quite challenging when it comes time to compose interventions. Said one:

> I wasn't sure who I was when doing this writing.

Another stated:

> I had not realized how much I depended on visual feedback
> when in a classroom or a tutorial situation.

A common thread in all of these comments: When you the moderator interact as a "Guide on the Side" and employ the voices and critical-thinking framework we've outlined in this book, you'll likely feel a very different sense of authorship, as well as a different sense of personal feedback from your participants.

Placing her finger on a key issue — emotional satisfaction — one past moderator remarked:

> I realize now that it is harder to get a similar emotional satis-
> faction from the online situation [as opposed to a face-to-face
> interaction].

If you expect or need a continuous round of personal gratification, a "Guide on the Side" approach will likely prove disappointing for you. A "Guide on the Side" is not in the middle of things, stirring things up, or entertaining with his or her wit, style, or technical prowess. The work you accomplish as a "Guide on the Side" facilitator is evident in the adaptation of *participants'* ideas and in new ways of mirroring *participants'* thoughts.

"Partly invisible" accurately describes your interactions as a facilitator. This invisibility can prove to be a serious source of frustration and annoyance.

But you must consider what it is that grounds your need to be visible in a group. Several weeks after making the "feeling invisible" comment in the moderator's discussion area, the moderator mentioned above returned to share insights she'd gleaned from viewing dozens of recent postings. Ideas she'd highlighted and juxtaposed, and metaphors and tensions she'd helped clarify, were visible throughout the dialogue area. She had not seen the impact of her work initially. But later, her emotional satisfaction was great — though it was not the result of public praise. The group members had gone forward to discover the scope of their *own* ideas — thanks to the groundwork and vision laid (mostly anonymously) by the moderator's interventions.

It's only natural to feel uncomfortable when conventional methods, such as relying on your own carefully conceived positions or your personal voice, aren't available to help you articulate and represent ideas. But effective online moderation demands flexibility and a capacity to change your voice and style to reflect the needs of others.

A second indicator of effective "Guide on the Side" moderation is more direct. Though not a subject of study, the repertoire of styles of interaction and response supported by the voices and the critical-thinking strategies described in this book should start appearing in participants' interchanges — as a result of your continued usage. If this is happening, participants will commonly begin their postings by citing others' notes in shortened form; they'll then start posing and responding to questions that are set crisply by the critical-thinking frameworks.

In other words, your efforts to capture discussions through metaphors, intriguing comparisons, or shifts in the levels of conversation will be taken up by the participants themselves. Participants begin recognizing the need to sharpen a discussion's focus or think more deeply about certain matters, and their new insights begin to appear as central to their postings. If you've done a good job of laying the support framework for pragmatic dialogue, the participants begin, at least partially, to facilitate their own dialogue. Participant responses commonly become shorter and more targeted to central topics. Social and argumentative forms of dialogue take up a smaller fraction of the exchanges. Participants openly explore the rationale for their positions, or open for examination the assumptions they now see as underscoring some of their thinking.

In short, the participants internalize your internal monologue as commentator, clarifier, and questioner of thoughts.

Where can the "Guide on the Side" voice and critical-thinking strategy framework ultimately take your working group or netcourse? We don't know, and we cannot hazard a guess. Application of new ideas brings evolutionary changes to all shareholders in a dialogue. Change means growth. Changes in methods of dialogue are often accompanied by tension, periods of instability, or even regression. But there are always parallel movements toward greater clarity and focus and increased complexity.

Our framework of voices and critical-thinking strategies isn't intended as a final and complete list of the modes of interaction and composition for your online group. But it is, we believe, an effective guide that will help you and other facilitators develop new capacities leading to greater depth of online dialogue — and, of course, enhanced learning among the participants you lead.