

Changes in Pedagogy: Building Community in the Online Classroom

Abstract: Learning is a social activity. Traditional learning, in the form of face-to-face, in-class, learning, with direct communication between student and teacher, has been shown to be inherently effective at creating a positive interactive learning community. The creation of a positive interactive learning community has been shown to create more effective learning in the classroom. Traditional teachers have a greater ability to close the psychological gap between themselves and their students than do online educators working with text-based dialogue due to proximity and, therefore, teach in a setting that lends itself to the creation of this community more than do less personal online courses. With the recent and drastic increase in online courses and degrees being offered throughout the world, the main questions of this paper are whether a social community in online education is beneficial to learning and how online teachers will and have adapted to the limitations of the text-based dialogue dominant in the cyber learning community, in order to compensate for the lack of verbal and physical cues granted by traditional learning, and in order to successfully build the needed learning environment? This study is limited to higher education and will use teacher and student observation as well as several studies within higher education, online education, and computer programming to show that learning communities are important to the online course, that they can be created online, and that text-based online courses can be as effective as traditional courses in creating that community.

According to a U.S. Department of Education 2008 statistic, 66% of the 4,200 two-year and four-year Title IV degree-granting postsecondary institutions across America offered some form of distance education programs and 65% of these offered college-level distance courses. At the start of the online distance learning phenomenon the distance learner could only earn single-unit credits, but now institutions offer complete four-year undergraduate degrees and masters programs entirely online.¹ Pre-internet distance courses used snail mail as the main means of correspondence between teacher and student; however, with the rise of the internet and computer networking technologies, distance education has become nearly synonymous with online education and the many forms of this.

This paper is not meant to be a tutorial on the different forms of online education or their pros and cons, but will instead address the effects that the loss of verbal and physical cues, as a

result of the switch from traditional learning environments to text-based or non-verbal communication in online courses, has had on the teacher and the ability to create a positive interactive learning community online. As online education courses and degrees become more popular across the globe, understanding these differences and adapting tactics to fit the medium will become more important to the effectiveness of world-wide education. Through examination of teacher and student observations about online education's success and comparison to traditional classroom teaching in higher education, we will explore how online pedagogy differs from traditional, specifically how creation of a learning community differs between mediums.

In her book entitled, *What Ever Happened to the Faculty?: Drift and Decision in Higher Education*, Professor Emerita of English at Indiana University and the former general secretary of the American Association of University Professors, Mary Burgan, expresses her many critiques of the trends in higher education, mainly that we have begun to steer away from teaching and learning to ensure higher profits and higher student graduation rates, among other things. Within this text she offers a biting critique of the online education system; that the medium, the internet, denies any sense of the community typically offered in traditional teaching.² One main assumption of much of the traditional pedagogical theorists is that community within the classroom is a key ingredient to successful teaching and learning. Its creation and development in an online setting is one of the major issues to be discussed in this paper.

Many educators, especially those of the liberal arts mind-set, believe that learning and education are inherently social. The majority of course material in traditional education is presented and discussed through verbal communication and, according to observations made in

the late 90's, teachers in a traditional classroom model were responsible for two-thirds of that communication. In the traditional face-to-face setting, a teacher may actively and continuously manipulate the material and the conversation to her idea of the class outcome.³ Similarly, the students have the ability to verbally discuss subjects with their teachers and interact within a community of peers. Dr. Karen Swan, an associate professor of Instructional Technology at the University of Albany, outlined the three kinds of interactivity that support learning in online courses and they are not unlike those of traditional classes, "interaction with content, the ability of learners to access, manipulate, synthesize, and communicate content information; interaction with instructors, the ability of learners to communicate with and receive feedback from their instructors; and interaction with classmates, the ability of learners to communicate with each other about content to create an active learning community".⁴ The obvious difference between traditional and online classrooms is that online classrooms are dominated by text-based dialogue if we assume that the course even offers the ability to communicate with your online classmates, such as in a conference or blackboard setting. Traditionally, distance learning was done either by snail mail, by one-way video recordings, or later by email only. It is only recently that we can communicate with one another despite distances in such a convenient way. Though courses may be offered that allow such tools as Skype to be used as a medium for dialogue, the majority are still text-based and therefore the most important to discuss.

An article by Elizabeth Stacey, education faculty member at Deakin University in Australia, entitled "Social Presence Online: Networking Learners at a Distance", reported on a study which found that social presence and level of student ability to participate in discussion was directly related to the successful learning of complex ideas in an online setting.⁵ In a study done at SUNY it was also found that there was a strong positive significant relationship between

online student belief in the presence of a good learning community within the course studied and course satisfaction. Between the same belief and perceived learning, between the perceived level of interaction with other students and course satisfaction, and between perceived learning from other students and course satisfaction a less strong, but equally significant relationship was found.⁶ There is a plethora of material supporting the idea that learning is made easier and more effective within a communicative learning environment; that same theory has been applied to online courses and there is an equally great amount of information on this.

Anyone who has communicated through text-based dialogue, which really is anyone that has written, typed, or texted a thought and shared that thought with others can understand that the written word has its benefits and limitations in communicative clarity. This difference between spoken and written/typed word is especially important for courses that use this form of communication as the dominant means of sharing thoughts such as in most online courses and even more so in those because many online courses involve interaction with people that you may have never made visual contact with. Traditionally, as discussed above, the complementary relationship between verbal, visual, and non-verbal speech has been crucial to effective community building. So, how can teachers adapt to fill the so-called loss of these crucial social cues and continue to create the needed learning environment in an online setting? A review of suggested theories and techniques follow that address just this question.

As discussed above, traditional teachers have the ability to create a community with all of the advantages of face-to-face contact. Because of this, their role as the professor, the giver of information and discussor has been cemented. In studies done since the 1980's it has been shown that teacher immediacy and immediacy behaviors, immediacy, "referring to the psychological distance between communicators"⁷ and immediacy behaviors, meaning those behaviors that

distance or bring closer the psychological distance between teacher and student, directly affect the creation of community.⁸ However, without the crucial verbal and non-verbal behaviors available to traditional educators the role of online educators has changed from more of a lecturer to more of a class facilitator and this is especially true in online higher education where less effort is deemed needed to provoke conversation in students than in lower level schooling. In one study of 17 graduate students on discussion in the online classroom it was found that the usual progression of speech: opine, state, inform, and comment, which traditionally is a pattern of speech mostly done by the teacher, showed that up to 98% of this particular pattern was done by students and not the teacher.⁹ A warning directly related to the new role and the availability of incredible amounts of information to be found on the internet, is that teachers of online courses can and have in some cases become information sharers instead of teachers, and, therefore, act more like internet librarians than actual professors. Part of the remedy to this is the creation of an effective interactive community.

The creation of community in online education is not the sole purpose of the online teacher, as it is merely one facet that is obviously needed in the classroom and apparently different from what it is in traditional settings. I have simply highlighted it for the clarity of this paper and to emphasize the belief that its creation inherently also helps create effective teaching. I also have restricted our view to teachers in order to take a closer look at how teachers are evolving to meet the requirements of text-based online courses, but of course another equally important aspect in the creation of community is the effectiveness by which students create a social presence online and express themselves in class. Though the role of the online educator is to facilitate this growth in students as well, much of the work must be done by students just as in a traditional setting. Courses in cyber-psychology, digital rhetoric, and other similar classes have

formed to better educate students and teachers in effective ways to present themselves online. As a result of the popularity of the internet in general, it would be easy to foresee new fields being created to explain our cyber lives and perceptions of reality, something that someone should probably write a sci-fi novel about. This being said, the other natural role of the online teacher, as with the traditional, is to encourage and help develop the students' social presence in the classroom. For text-based online distance education, this means helping to establish an online social presence.¹⁰

As stated above, outside courses for students and entire fields are being created to learn about and teach online presence. Humorously, there are also online courses in helping to better your online social presence, which will help you learn more efficiently in an online setting. There are well-researched ideas regarding how teachers can create that interactive learning community and some of those ideas will be discussed now through the three main types of interactivity discussed above, interaction with content, student-to-teacher interaction, and student-to-student interaction.

Computer-based learning and multimedia design researchers, Lanicki and Leigle, reduced the many forms and styles of computer-based education to form ten main concepts believed to be effective in the creation of computer-based courses, though not shown in that particular study to be effective always and they are as follows:

1. Instructor as facilitator
2. Use of variety of presentation styles
3. Multiple exercises
4. Hands-on problems
5. Learner control of pacing
6. Frequent testing
7. Clear feedback
8. Consistent layout
9. Clear Navigation
10. Available help screens

11 (See Swan, 24)

In studies done specifically on online asynchronous learning, it has been found that when instructors act as facilitators of discussion using clear instructions in defining the discussion topic, student participation and reflection was seen to improve compared to that of a traditional classroom where, although instruction can possibly be more accurately conveyed, conversation can be dominated by several students. These findings argue that, contrary to popular belief, the limitations on verbal communication inherent in a non-verbal setting have actually, in many researchers' minds, created hyper-personal communities.¹² And this is perhaps due to the fact that those physical or verbal cues that exist in the classroom can not be observed by online students and therefore greater effort in an effective community is made to express those things in written/typed language. Though it is perhaps not completely causational, the role of the teacher is still correlated to effective class participation.

In a short article by Sharon Kleinman, a professor at Quinnipiac University and teacher of asynchronous online courses, specific, field-tested recommendations are made to other online teachers about how to create an effective class. Predominantly, Kleinman says, clear and efficient communication of course expectations and lay-out are just as important online as in the classroom and grading rubrics should be laid-out before the class begins.¹³ According to Putz and Arnold, the effective articulation of grading requirements, especially those involving participation, had a greater impact in the asynchronous setting and may have boosted participation.¹⁴ The reason for increased participation is unclear, though the ability to see visually the amount of participation given by each student may compel students to participate more. Clear formatting of the class and effectively communicating this to the class is the first step in the creation of an effective online course as it is with a traditional course.

To elicit student-to-student interaction and help to develop their online presence, online ice-breakers are encouraged. Kleinman requires students to post autobiographical information and then to comment on the information of two other students.¹⁵ As has been discussed above, the increase in explanation of the total dialogue, meaning explaining anything from sarcasm or more subtle expressions to more observational comments similar to those made over the phone or radio such as what wine students drink when studying or a particular chair they are using at the moment, things that are usually observed using the eyes or ears, are typically included in the text of the dialogue. Courses and discussion online must then also allow social networking and bonding to take place to a greater extent than would be needed in a traditional classroom. Kleinman also suggests some use of collaborative projects to initiate student-to-student interaction, however, this type of student-to-student interaction, she warns, should be used sparingly because collaborative efforts are often more stressful and many students like to take online courses because it offers a freer schedule than formal classes and therefore the more collaborative projects may cause for stressful time management issues, especially for those working while taking the course as they will need to schedule time as a group outside of class.

In terms of student-to-teacher interaction, though less of the discussion is dominated by teachers, a greater emphasis on the managerial role of the teacher must be emphasized in online courses, as the bulk of work is done individually. Commenting on student work and feedback is important coming from both the teacher and from peers, and the frequent and consistent clarification and commentary can assist teachers with the creation of online social presence, which, as stated above, can assist in the creation of community and overall effectiveness of the course. In this case it may be suggested that the standard for commentary and frequency of

commentary should also be outlined in the course requirements and syllabus during the beginnings of the class.

In terms of content as it relates to interactivity, the meaningfulness of content studied and discussion about the content can be seen as supportive of all forms of interaction as it is the basis for the class. I will not go into content-based suggestions as I believe that this needs to be more specific to the course and to talk about several course lay-outs would be too tedious for this paper (for a great example of an in-depth look at an online course structure see Ropponen's "Experiences of learning and satisfaction with teaching of basic courses of ergonomics over Internet—the Ergonetti program". See bibliography for full citation). However, referring to the 10 main concepts believed to be effective in the creation of a computer-based course addressed above it is plausible that certain ways to format content work to promote community than do others in the online setting. These, in the opinion of this author based on studies read and time done in traditional schooling, may include hands on practical problems related to content and collaborative projects, though the latter may not be appropriate always for online courses due to the particular life situations of some of its students and how that may effect time-management.

Though there are many fears about the quality of online distance education and the negative implications that it may have for our abilities to socialize in a face-to-face setting as we become more and more plugged-in to the web (so much so that internet addiction is actually a term used in the psychology field), no body of work has been produced that can declare overall that online education does not or cannot have just as much success in effective learning outcomes as traditional courses. And the reality is that whether the internet can be adapted to replace traditional modes of learning it is very much a presence and one that, due to popularity, we will have to adapt to and try to make a success.

In regard to teaching and pedagogy, it would seem that as we begin to understand ways to adapt to the loss of verbal communication's use in the classroom, teachers will be, and have been, forced to change the ways that they present information and adapt the ways in which they create a positive interactive learning community. A shift away from the lecturer to more of the facilitator seems to be a trend, though many researchers suggest that this is not a loss, merely different, and that both teachers and students, in the absence of those fundamental social cues and immediacy behaviors that allow traditional social interaction in general to be so effective when done well, may find themselves working harder to create a sense of online community, though this does not mean that it can not be done just as well, or better. Research is still very much needed before any definite conclusions about the negative and positive differences between traditional and online education can be declared fact. Until then, our society will have to make the best of our cyber-reality and adapt to it and all of its differences, not just pedagogical; and this is something that very obviously is already happening.

Notes

1. *The College Blue Book: Distance Learning Programs*, 37th Edition, Vol. 6 (Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010), 7.
2. Philip G. Altbach (review), "Mary Burgan. What Ever Happened to the Faculty? Drift and Decision in Higher Education, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, (2006)." *The Review of Higher Education* Vol. 31, No. 1 (Fall 2007): 109, <http://muse.jhu.edu>.
3. Judith Blanchette, "Characteristics of teacher talk and learner talk in the online learning environment." *Language and Education*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (September 2009): 391, <http://web.ebscohost.com>.
4. Karen Swan, "Building Learning Communities in Online Courses: the importance of interaction." *Education, Communication and Information*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2002): 24, <http://web.ebscohost.com>.
5. Elizabeth Stacey, "Social Presence Online: Networking Learners at a Distance." *Education and Information Technologies* vol. 7, no. 4 (2002): 293, <http://www.springerlink.com>.
6. Swan, "Building Learning Communities", 29.
7. M. Weiner and A. Mehrabian. *Language within Language: immediacy, a channel in verbal communication*. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968).
8. Swan, "Building Learning Communities", 25.
9. Blanchette, "Characteristics of teacher talk", 398.
10. Stacey, "Social Presence Online", 287-294.
11. Swan, "Building Learning Communities", 24.
12. Ibid., 23-49.
13. Sharon Kleinman, "Strategies for Encouraging Active Learning, Interaction, and Academic Integrity in Online Courses." *Communication Teacher*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (January 2005): 15, <http://web.ebscohost.com>.
14. Putz, Peter, and Arnold, Patricia. "Communities of Practice: guidelines for the design of online seminars in higher education." *Education, Communication and Information* Vol. 1, No. 2 (2001): 181-195, <http://web.ebscohost.com>.
15. Kleinman, "Strategies", 15.

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