Going Fully Online: Reflections on Creating an Engaging Environment for Online Learning

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When faced with the major pedagogical shift of moving face-to-face classes online, two professors reflect on the process, the learning, and the ways in which they can retain face-to-face engagement in an asynchronous online environment. They share the results of student surveys and colleague emails, along with their own thoughts about moving classes online.

Keywords
Online instruction, Classroom interaction, Stance

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Reflections on Creating an Engaging Environment for Online Learning

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Abstract
When faced with the major pedagogical shift of moving face-to-face classes online, two professors reflect on the process, the learning, and the ways in which they can retain face-to-face engagement in an asynchronous online environment. They share the results of student surveys and colleague emails, along with their own thoughts about moving classes online.

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Introduction
The meeting was over, but all we could say was, “Is she crazy?” “This is impossible!” The Chair of our Department had given us a directive---to put our Reading Master’s program fully online—and we were still reeling from the thought. We saw this as not only impossible but against everything we knew about good teaching and learning. She seemed to be saying that online teaching was a good pedagogic and monetary move for our program. Surely she knew that learning couldn’t occur if transactional distance (Moore, 1991) occurred online. Even though she presented research that supported online courses, we weren’t ready to join this cyber learning bandwagon. Our program was strong and our candidates were easily passing our state teacher’s exam. Weeks of tense discussions followed about the nature of teaching and learning and the pros and cons of online classes. We reflected on Boyer’s (1997) notions that university faculty should themselves be students of their students. We also considered Kreber’s (2007) notion that we “turn the lens also on ourselves” (p. 3) to understand how the scholarship of teaching and learning could inform our decisions. For several years that followed, we embraced our chair’s directive to go fully online, learning about ourselves as learners along the way.

The Dilemma We Faced
Our hesitation to going fully online stemmed from some non-negotiable factors in our face-to-face classrooms: rich professor-to-student interactions, a collegial atmosphere, and powerful student-to-student interactions. We began to ask ourselves about the things we
value the most in our teaching, following the notions of the scholarship of teaching and learning pattern. Almost immediately, we decided to collect end-of-term surveys, so that we could learn from our students as the courses evolved. We also began collecting professor-to-professor emails about our progress with online teaching.

As a theoretical framework, we embraced Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of social interactionism and Rosenblatt’s (1994) transaction theory to understand both classroom interactions and reading processes. We also understood that a connected stance (Wegmann & McCauley, 2007) was necessary in order to ensure social presence (Moore, 1991; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976; Stein, Wanstreet, Calvin, Overtoom, & Wheaton, 2005). The connected stance, with its rich engagements and numerous possibilities for questioning, challenging, wondering, introspection, etc., was important to us as constructivist teachers (Bruner, 1986).

Taking this into consideration, we decided that powerful interactions made our face-to-face classes so potent. These interactions were critical to the teaching/learning event (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978). What would happen to the personal contact, the laughter, the asides, the “how-are-things-going,” and the informal before-class banter? All of these are important to establishing a community of learners. All of these added to the richness of conversations. What about the engaging conversations about course content we facilitated? Would students participate in online discussions and assume that connected stance (Wegmann & McCauley, 2007) we so desired? Up until our Chair’s request, we had only experienced face-to-face interactions and knew the power they could hold.

Since we were being asked to give online teaching a chance, we had to examine these non-negotiable factors and decide how we could preserve them. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning framework encouraged us to reflectively assess the first few semesters of our journey in the transition from face-to-face to online instruction. It allowed us to reflect and consider our first attempts, in order to make positive changes in subsequent attempts. We hope that by writing about our transition into online teaching it will encourage others to contemplate their own journeys and the ways in which the scholarship of teaching and learning can inform our practice.

To date, we have collected over 125 end-of-term surveys, as well as six semesters’ worth of emails to and from our colleagues, related to course implementation. Following are the thoughts our students and colleagues shared with us about online teaching and learning.

Results

Blackboard, our course management system, was reported to be easy to use by our colleagues. We were able to post lectures, PowerPoint presentations, discussion questions, and other materials necessary for delivering course content. We were also able to create whole class discussion groups as well as smaller 4-member groups. Our students completed semester-long projects that included literature reviews, PowerPoint presentations, and other formats to display their learning. At regular monthly meetings, we talked about what we learned from our students as we taught our first courses and how to address these issues. Because all of us were learning about this at the same time, our faculty grew closer together as we struggled together. There seemed to be no problem in bringing the content to the students, but we still struggled with three non-negotiables that
frame the next section of this paper: 1. a collegial atmosphere, 2. powerful student-to-student interactions, and 3. rich professor-to-student interactions.

In the following paragraphs we present the results of the surveys and colleague emails as a way to understand the process of transforming our courses online. As with any interpretive qualitative reporting (Erickson, 1986), we were part of the data collection and the faculty group, so our voices can be seen and heard in our use of “we” and “our.” (Our thoughts that follow are quasi-experimental at best, informed musings at worst, and we acknowledge that scientific rigor was not a focus of this essay.)

**Collegial Atmosphere**
To begin, we were concerned about affective factors (Mathewson, 1994). Computer-mediated communication was different and more complex for both the teacher and the student (Mondada, 2006). We feared that we would lose a lot of interaction by not being able to pick up on non-verbal cues. We wondered if students would be able to talk to each other in professional ways.

*What we learned:*

a. Both students and colleagues reported that it was helpful to have students introduce themselves. So, we decided that one of the first assignments should be to post personal and professional information on the Introduction Forum discussion board. Everyone was required to read and respond to their colleagues.

b. Our colleagues informed us that they had to carefully craft our statements, emails, and assignments. We learned that spoken word, devoid of physical non-verbal cues, was easy to misread. We learned to double and triple check our writing, especially when giving critical feedback. To clarify statements, there were times we had to resort to phone calls or face-to-face meetings to iron out the difficulties.

c. The faculty described using emoticons, or symbols used by the online community for emotion and expression such as :) which my computer turned into a grinning, smiling face. They said these emoticons helped give strength to their voice as writers, as well as embraced the learners’ digital native culture.

d. Finally, to encourage students to informally chat throughout the semester about their world outside of school we added a Cyber Café, which the students reported was a nice addition to our courses.

**Student-to-Student Interactions**
We knew that interactions needed to be an intentional part of the instructional design (Smith, 2005; Zhang, Perris, and Yeung, 2005) but how much control would we need to hold? Could we just assign them the task of “talking about something” or would we need to give more structure and direction? We also wondered how discussions “worked” asynchronously. We knew that the success of our online courses would depend on the students being able to have deep, meaningful discussions. However, we wondered if they would do that on their own. We wondered about people who were not strong interpersonally. Since all of the students’ thinking had to be written, would they “talk”
What we learned:

a. Our students told us that it was best to give due dates for posting and replying on discussion boards, to press our students to respond to the prompts and each other.

b. We designed a discussion rubric that detailed our expectations for responding to their colleagues’ postings. We wanted them to know that we expected them to give thoughtful responses, extend the thinking of their colleagues, show their learning by referring to theory and research, admit their own struggles, and challenge their peers. Our “shy” students informed us that online “talking” actually had a freeing effect on them. They reported relative anonymity and were able to speak their mind, without the usual face-to-face awkwardness.

c. Students reported that because they had more time to respond in the asynchronous environment, they had more time to carefully craft their answers. They told us this gave some of them courage to write what they really thought.

d. We discovered through end of term surveys that for marginalized groups (ethnic, religious, lifestyle, etc.) the social stigmas that they might have felt in a face-to-face class were reduced or eliminated. They were able to control the amount of personal information about themselves that they wanted others to know.

e. Students also told us that because replying to colleagues’ postings was required, everyone had an audience and everyone was listened to. (This was not necessarily true in our face to face classes.)

Teacher-to-Student Interactions

Finally, we worried about our roles as instructors of the courses. We knew that we needed to provide “multiple means of communication to support the need to engage in work and social interaction, both publicly and privately” (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robbins, & Shoemaker, 2000, paragraph #3), but what would these “multiple means” be when working in an online environment? Would we participate in the discussion postings with them or would that change the dynamics of the group?

What we learned:

a. After the second semester, the faculty decided to create a CD that included mini-lectures by the professors our students would eventually have online. These were mailed to students at the beginning of the semester and students reported that they could relate more personally to the professors and have a face to connect to the printed word.

b. We realized early on that inserting ourselves in the conversations on the discussion boards did indeed influence the thinking of the group. It appeared that when we posted, we would have several replies--but at the expense of student-to-student discussion which we were also trying to encourage. In other words, our post became a magnet for all students, regardless if they were genuinely
interested in what we were saying. So, most of the faculty informed us that they purposely did NOT respond to students’ comments on the discussion board.

c. Colleagues told us that instead of posting directly into a discussion group, a personal email was a more powerful tool to have their presence felt in the course. We could send and receive emails in the background, without disturbing the flow of student-to-student conversations.

d. Emails were not only used to comment on course content, but we found that emails that complimented the student on his/her thinking or interactions with colleagues were also very well received. Some faculty reported that they tried to send a “pat on the back” email to each student, at least once a week.

**Further Research**

As Elton (2008) points out, the work of the university professor is teaching and research combined to focus on student learning. The beliefs that undergird the scholarship of teaching and learning brought us to the point of reflection and assessment of our own instruction, and we have lingering questions to explore. Because online learning is becoming more global and our classes are attracting students from a variety of cultures, we now worry about transactional distance (Moore, 1991), or the psychological gap that occurs when students and teachers are separated geographically. We continue to look for ways to increase social presence (the degree to which the user feels present in a mediated interaction) and thereby reduce transactional distance (Stein, Wanstreet, Calvin, Overtoom, & Wheaton, 2005). We are looking at ways to add interactive Web 2.0 capabilities to our courses, to closely monitor conversations at the beginning of our courses, and to watch for cross-cultural misunderstandings.

We have now begun a rigorous research project to use discourse analysis techniques to understand the moves (or purposes of communicating) on discussion boards. Preliminarily, we are finding that social presence requires an optimal amount of structure, yet we are not certain how much structure is necessary. The SoTL framework is helping us determine how to focus on our own delivery of content online, while maintaining a balance in student needs. We are becoming firmly convinced, through our own continuing research and reading the research of others, that online interactions can enhance content engagement, if the instructor shapes the interactions to facilitate a connected stance (Wegmann & McCauley, 2007).

Five years ago, when our chair asked us to consider online classes, we struggled to come to terms with our non-negotiables. Through colleague and students’ surveys and emails, we feel we have made great strides in our understanding of online teaching, and we are excited about the results we are finding. We still have numerous questions about online teaching and learning, but the SoTL framework should help our future analyses by helping us focus on our own teaching and make connections between our personal philosophies of learning, our students’ needs, and enlarging the knowledge base.
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