

Putting the "Classroom" Back in Online Learning

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Abstract

It is not difficult to see the advantages that online learning promises. However, it is only a virtual classroom, not a brick and mortar one. It is only an interface, not a face-to-face environment, and I began to wonder what current instructors were doing in efforts to make this kind of environment as effective as a classroom. To find out, I sought out online instructors who had taught extensively in classrooms. I asked them about what they were doing to promote the kind of student-to-student discussion and mentoring that takes place in a classroom environment, not only in the class, but before class, during breaks and afterward. This paper outlines the problem, and depicts what these instructors had to say about their efforts in dealing with these issues. Within these interviews I found working instructors who are attempting to make a virtual environment a livable, breathable, and sustainable place to learn and grow.

Introduction

The proliferation of online coursework in colleges and universities has grown at an alarming rate in the minds of many educators whose concerns have been cast aside by proponents claiming that “the lack of face-to-face interaction can be substituted by online discussion in bulletin board systems, online video conferences or listserves (Blake, 2000)” (Yang & Cornelius, 2004, p. 862). There seems, however, to be a great deal of variation in the forms, abilities, and security safeguards of the software used for these online classes. Actual synchronous communication of audio, video, and even text is rare. The concern questions the validity of equating these technical communication boards with the face-to-face learning that takes place in a classroom, and “Many educators and trainers do not support online instruction because they do not believe it actually solves difficult teaching and learning problems (Conlon, 1998)” (Johnson, Aragon, Shaik, & Palma-Rivas, 1999, p. 2). “Typically, the electronic discussion board is part of an online environment. What instructors oftentimes forget is that the discussion board takes the place of the verbal discussion and interaction that occurs in a face-to-face classroom” (Aragon, 2003, p. 63). In doing so, such boards negate the possibility of tacit learning between students and instructor, mentoring between students, and, in some cases, student collaboration within these course structures.

“Students in face-to-face courses can more easily get together for an extended period of time to discuss class projects, work out any differences of opinion, and build social relationships. In contrast, online students do not have similar opportunities, although the technology provides a surrogate form for similar interactions. This suggests that the online environment may lack the strong social dimension that is beneficial to face-to-face classroom experience” (Johnson et al., p. 6).

It is obvious that such classes can reach far greater numbers of students, freed from geographical presence requirements, time constraints, and social family obligations that once barred them from university coursework. One student I know of personally had wanted a master’s degree for

years, but was prevented from attending a college or university for a long enough period to obtain such a degree due to the fact that she was married to a military man who simply had to go where he was ordered. The reasons for offering online coursework are myriad and valid. Still, many opponents of online coursework “question whether or not online learning can provide the same interaction between instructor-students and students-students as traditional classrooms offered (Roblyer & Ekhaml, 2000)” (Yang & Cornelius, 2004, p. 862). There is also a question of appropriate and immediate feedback. “Face-to-face students received live and dynamic forms of support from the instructor while the online group received it in the form of one-way static communication” (Johnson et al., 1999, p. 6).

There is no doubt that “Students can conduct their own self-directed learning without interacting with others in an online learning environment. However, several scholars asserted that interaction would increase the learning quality in online learning” (Chen, 2004, p. 119). “According to Bibeau (2001), teaching and learning functions are inherently social endeavors” (Aragon, 2003, p. 57), and social interactions online miss important features that are inherent in face-to-face classrooms. Chen tells us that “people cannot express moods or emotions by only using text” (Chen, p. 119), but emotions aren’t all that is missed, body language, dynamic debate, the transfer of the instructor’s awe and wonder in the depths of his subject area. All is not roses in the online course corner of the World Wide Web. “The persistence rates for online learners are considerably lower than in face-to-face classes. One of the reasons cited has been the isolation students feel when they have only their computers for company” (Lawrence, 1999, p. 1). This fact alone indicates that something in the face-to-face environment is not only missing, but unaccounted for in the use of bulletin boards for discussion. Many students have simply given up the notion with all its advantages and moved their efforts in learning to a face-to-face environment.

I am not dissuaded in these arguments from the fact that online learning is here to stay, and properly so. The needs of a large population of learners cannot be and should not be ignored, and the technology, as is its nature, will improve if we search out and make use of the experiences of both instructors and students in these courses and programs. Maor tells us that “good teaching involves learners actively participating, reflectively thinking, and collaborating with one another” (Maor, 2003, p. 128). Many online instructors believe that forming an online community within the course or program can accommodate these needs. “Distance educators show increasing acceptance of the idea that the development of a sense of community among learners in online courses enhances their learning” (Anderson, 2004, p. 183). Anderson feels that such communities are either “task-focused or relationship-focused” (Anderson, p. 183), but I would venture that some element of both might likely be present in an online group that has formed a learning community. Chen talks about Clark’s 1998 proposal of three principles associated with these online learning communities. The first emphasizes that a learning community is not built, but grown itself...molded by its members to create its own environment. Second, strong leaders are needed, not only to manage the community, but to act as online facilitators, and third, he notes that personal narratives are encouraged (Chen, 2004, p. 121). Some believe that forming learning communities can be better accomplished if students have some face-to-face experiences mixed in with the online experiences. Colleges and universities are experimenting with what is called hybrid classes, where a class meets face-to-face perhaps once a month with the interim class-work being done online. Other universities, especially in cohort modeled programs, require a residential experience to initiate the program though all the class work is done online. Of this Lawrence says, “They now had faces, voices, and memories of

shared experiences to give fuller dimension to the words on their computer screens (Lawrence, 1999, p. 1).

There is no lack of suggestions to make online learning more palatable and less isolating to students, but the effectiveness of these suggestions is generally unknown as “there is little research to fully understand the benefits and pitfalls of online instruction, especially compared to face-to-face learning environments (Johnson et al., 1999, p. 2). It was expressions such as this that led to this research project. The question of what online instructors are doing presently to encourage both student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction formed a basis for interview questions. I sought to determine their present practices in these kinds of courses and determine their impressions of effect as compared to face-to-face experiences. Only instructors with extensive face-to-face experiences who were now instructing online as well were selected.

The Study in General

There were 6 interviews conducted with instructors who all had extensive teaching experience both in the classroom, face-to-face, and online. Of the six two were male and four were female. The names presented in this study are fictitious to safeguard their identities. All are currently employed in public and private universities as of the summer of 2006, and most are involved in teaching graduate students as well as undergraduate classes. In general I found that they were a very concerned but hopeful group of individuals who have both the presence to view the problems they face as surmountable while acknowledging that the online learning environment may not as yet be as effective a learning medium as the face-to-face classroom at least in the sense of social interaction.

The males seemed to feel that the online classes provided sufficient social interaction while the females were more concerned about the student’s needs for social interaction and their abilities to supply those needs with proper outlets. I found that while there were many concerns expressed by all, there were many instances of attempts to increase the social interactions of online students as well. There were also a number of unique ideas to enhance the social aspect of the online classes. I found that the importance of creating a social presence was more on their minds than the creation of a learning community, although I had the distinct impression that most of these instructors felt that every online class was such a community of learners, and thus did not feel it was necessary to make that a point of their discussions. There was also general agreement as to stating a set of ground rules about discussions. All noted that they felt this was imperative to a successful online experience. The technologies employed by their individual universities varied, however all indicated that the tools associated with them were growing in response to expressed needs, though slowly. Most expressed the need for training for would be instructors, and most were appalled at both the lack of technical support provided by their schools and the lack of understanding of the online process by administrators of the online programs in which they were participating.

Some Interview Specifics

The interviews showed several notions that were commonly used to increase socialization among the students. Jean mentioned, “I usually create a link in every class called the Water Cooler link.” Such chat rooms allow students to socialize within the class but outside of the class discussions.

Sandy explained it this way:

In face-to-face classes you know people go to breaks together, they have coffee before class, they chat after class, the teacher chats with them usually. You can come up and ask questions. You don't have that online, so, when I first started teaching, I set up the lounge. So, the first couple of classes people would go there to share personal things like, "I found this really interesting book," "I lost my job," or "my best friend died." It was a place where we connected to each other.

I found a later comment by Sandy about this perplexing as she said, "The last couple of groups have not been interested in the Lounge, and I don't know why." It may not be an unusual happenstance for learners to grow out of some things and grow into others. It may be time for Sandy to retire the lounge and replace it with something more relevant to her current learners.

David made a comment that may apply to Sandy's dilemma. He said, "I found that different classes confronted with the same choices, will inexplicably reject offerings unanimously accepted by the sister class."

Sharon did something unique in this area, although the link she set up was not a social link; it seemed to draw students into discussion about things within the course or the text that they did not understand. She put it this way:

I do have this conference that's called "What's new to you," and it's open through the entire course, and it's...there's very little structure to it except that it's not the social area, you know. It's about what's new to you, about what you're reading, what strikes you like, "I don't get it." Well, this is the place to talk about it.

When asked how they get the students talking, many replied, as Jerry did, "I said they have to respond three times a week if they wanted a certain grade." The notion of forcing responses was echoed by most of these interviewees, although the methods differed.

Susan said, "I made them be interactive. I actually gave them assignments that paired them off; that put them in small groups, and they could do their assignment any way they wanted to, e-mail, phone, meet at a coffee shop."

Sandy's approach was a bit different; she told me that, "They had to present a mini-lesson that they had to develop and present to the class." She mentioned that in a face-to-face class with only thirteen weeks of meetings, this was a difficult process, while online she simply had each student sign up for three of the lessons that they could take online anytime. Essentially, being online made this notion work better than being in a classroom.

There was, however, one participant who disagreed wholeheartedly with this idea of forcing participation. David expressed it this way:

I've seen it done this way we most recently did it where I didn't impose any rules on them except that they had to respond to the prompt with five paragraphs, and that was more so I could assess their abilities with English conversations, but I did not make any requirements that they post to anyone. And what I was amazed to find was that the discussions and the postings since the students didn't feel they had to ... it increased parallel posting almost ten-fold. I still find this true with the new class.

Some of the other participants spoke at length about backing into the shadows after they get the group going; in essence letting the group take over the mainstay of the conversation so that they can act only as a facilitator. Sandy says of this, "It's real tricky because I don't want to make a comment after every comment because people are going to listen to me and not each other, but I don't want them to feel that I'm not there." It would seem that presence is important, but a student centered approach carries as well online as it does in a classroom.

Sharon says, "I let them keep it going and then, if I notice the communication was dying out I would put something out there that would really bring them to life so to speak in some way a new direction maybe." This is equivalent to a classroom situation in which an instructor may spur the conversation when it has reached a stumbling block or an impasse.

Along these lines, Jerry noted, "I don't want it to be a two way conversation between them and me. I want them to develop the conversation amongst the members of this small group."

Sharon actually lays this notion out at the beginning of her classes in a mini lecture where she says, "You'll likely hear of a guy named Stephen Brookfield. Well, here's what Steve says, 'When you teach by discussion, this is what happens, blah blah...' so here's the deal, you can tell by what he says that you can talk to me and I can talk to you, but it's more important that you guys talk to each other."

Jean uses a clever approach to keep the students at the center of the conversation. She notes about student questions, "I'm going to answer it within the next forty-eight hours, but here's the deal. Post it to the web board. I want all of the students to have a chance to answer the question." Of course she comments on their answers and may add her own take on the subject later.

Several of these instructors find the use of telephone conferences to be significant in both lines of social presence and heightening a sense of community. Jean requires that the students participate in at least one phone conference a term. She actually sets up two, but with students in different time zones around the world, it is difficult to get her students together all at one time. Later, she posts the dialogue from the conference, "so they don't miss out on what their questions were in conversation." She feels strongly that these conference calls are an important feature of her online classes. As she says, "Things like that just continue to make it real to them."

Sandy said about these kinds of calls, "I really think they need other ways of connecting than just the asynchronous online communication."

My last question to each of these participants was, "Which do you prefer, online or face-to-face?" The answers were as varied as the individuals. Susan likes the face-to-face interaction, she likes to see their faces to gauge whether she is getting through to them or not. David talked about his animated and demonstrative teaching style, and feels that it is lost in the online classes. Sandy loves being able to do both; she loves the convenience of not having to go to campus to teach, but she wouldn't want all her classes to be online. Jerry also doesn't see himself going in one direction or the other; he sees benefits in doing both. Jean teaches almost exclusively online, but tries to teach at least a couple of classes a year so as not to lose her classroom skills. Sharon says she's a bit shy in front of a group, and prefers the online classes to face to face. Yet she did mention that she thought it would help if she could see the students.

Conclusion

Online learning is here, we face the challenge as instructors to make it or make of it the best use of time and effort in terms of student's learning. Orey, Koenecke, and Crozier state,

“The vision of Epic Learning that is the best solution for tomorrow will be a combination of traditional methods enhanced and/or used in conjunction with technology-driven learning tools, better known as Blended E-learning”(Orey, Koenecke, & Crozier, 2003, p. 261). I spent some time thinking about that sentence and what all of the interviewees had said to me. Both Sharon and David would heartily disagree with that statement. Sharon said that she would never design a distance education class unless it could be taken by distant students, and David said that Hybrids and Blended E-learning begs the question as, if they are close enough to meet, why bother doing it online? From these individual instructors, I heard that online learning is not equivalent to face-to-face classroom environments, but I heard more than that. I learned that the instructors of today in online classes are not just teaching; they are working toward making that form of learning a better, less isolating, and more reflective method of learning. In this I have gained some faith that they can put some of the classroom back into online learning.

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