Progressive Online Teacher Education: Developing Shifts in Methodologies

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ABSTRACT: Online offerings across institutions of higher education are on the rise. This article examines some of the factors that are driving this increase, and it reviews the literature on emerging pedagogies of online instruction. Rooted within Bank Street College of Education's progressive orientation, we found, in our analysis of our own online courses, a shift in methodology rather than one in pedagogy. Using a case study approach, we discuss and analyze our online teaching practices toward articulating these shifts in progressive methodology as we negotiated the differences between face-to face and online learning. The article contextualizes our online courses within the communities-of-inquiry framework. We focus on the development of the teaching, social, and cognitive presences in constructing two social justice–oriented courses on emotional and behavioral issues and language acquisition.

Online learning in higher education has expanded dramatically over the last decade. The percentage of higher education students enrolled in at least one online course has tripled, from a little less than 10% in 2003 to 32% in 2011 (Allen & Seaman, 2013, p. 19). The 2012 Babson Survey Research Group reported that while overall enrollment in U.S. higher education is in slight decline, enrollment in online courses continues to grow (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Institutions of higher education are grappling with the implications of a changing pedagogical landscape increasingly shaped by digital media.

This article explores how we, instructors at Bank Street College of Education, negotiated the intersection of online teaching and learning within Bank Street's progressive orientation. Bank Street's pedagogical approach is grounded in the developmental interaction framework, which holds that learning is inherently a social process rooted in environmental contexts (Nager & Shapiro, 2000). The developmental interaction approach "starts with learners, and reflects the recursive nature of the development of educators and children alike" (Bank Street College of Education, 2012, p. 14). In addition to the social and contextual nature of learning, learning occurs in "the *interaction* between the cognitive and affective domains" (Nager & Shapiro, 2007, p. 8). The learners grapple with their attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions by problematizing social contexts as they relate to the course content

and personal experiences. Growth occurs when the learner is engaged with other learners around meaningful experiences.

Using a case study approach, we reflect upon our online teaching experiences in order to better articulate the possibilities of teaching online from a critical and progressive perspective. Our work occurred within the context of larger institutional conversations about the role of online learning at a progressive institution. We draw on the community of inquiry (CoI) framework, which describes constructivist online learning environments as requiring three interdependent elements—the social, cognitive, and teaching presences—to analyze the two online courses subject of this study.

Background

Literature Review

Online education continues to grow, promising greater access for students and opportunities for instructors to examine their practices as they explore new tools and methods (Herman, 2012; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009). This literature review examines fiscal and consumer-driven growth of online offerings, as well as the challenges that this growth brings. We analyze the current discourse around online pedagogy in higher education, first looking at the conception of online courses as vehicles for content delivery, then moving to the literature that calls for a "new" learner-centered pedagogy of online learning.

Online learning has become increasingly important to institutions of higher education, and this trend is unlikely to reverse itself. The Babson Survey Research Group (Allen & Seaman, 2013) reported that in 2012, 6.7 million students were enrolled in at least one online course, with 62% of all institutions of higher education offering fully online degree programs. The survey also found that nearly 70% of chief academic officers reported that online education is "critical to their institution's long-term strategy" (p. 16). Not only have offerings increased and diversified, but online education is also increasingly seen as central to institutions' long-term planning.

Several factors have contributed to this growth. Green and Wagner (2011) found that the advancement of accessible technologies, the pressures of an evolving economy—specifically, the need for new skills that are responsive to a changing job landscape—and the opportunity to attract new students from underserved markets drive the increase in online enrollment. In a study of the factors contributing to the growth in online programming, Betts, Hartman, and Oxholm (2009, p. 11) found reduced institutional costs to be of particular significance. In addition, student expectations for a "wireless campus environment, multimedia classrooms, web enhanced courses, optional online courses, electronic resources, access to the library's digital collection

and administrative records, and 24/7 tech support" have driven institutions to build the infrastructure that supports online instruction. All these forces have contributed to increased options for instructors and students.

In addition to being a practical response to consumer and fiscal pressures, there are those who see in the expansion of online programming the promise of more egalitarian and accessible opportunities for learning (Matkin, 2012; Ukpokodu, 2010). For those who have access to digital media and technologies, online learning succeeds in providing knowledge and resources across the boundaries of a traditional classroom (Matkin, 2012; Moloney & Oakley, 2010; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009). Proponents of online learning argue that online education could increase student access to education and lower costs (Matkin, 2012; Moloney & Oakley, 2010; Sturgis, 2012). The promise of nearly limitless resources and opportunities to collaborate across time and space makes online learning an attractive possibility for students and institutions alike.

The continued growth of online courses and programs, while mostly viewed as a positive development, is not without challenges (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Of central concern is the learner experience. Dropout rates for students enrolled in online courses continues to be proportionally high (Dietz-Uhler, Fisher, & Han, 2008; Vesely, Bloom, & Sherlock, 2007), and the Babson Survey Research Group report finds that nearly 80% of academic leaders, while championing the expansion of online offerings, also understand that not all students will benefit equally from online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Reasons commonly given are the need for greater self-discipline on the part of students taking online courses and a greater investment of time needed for online learning (Yukselturk & Bulut, 2007). Another factor believed to negatively affect retention and students' experiences with online learning is the isolation that students taking online courses frequently report feeling (Vesely et al., 2007).

These persistent challenges point to the importance of an online pedagogy that values the creation of learning communities in which students feel connected and responsible for one another's growth and development. A tension exists, however, in the realm of online learning regarding pedagogy. A common perception of online courses is that teaching online is about "packaging online content" (Becket, 2012). The notion of an online course as a content delivery system is more reality than perception. The recent explosion of massive online courses, aimed at dispersing content to the widest possible audiences, is a case in point. In a recent review of a range of massive online courses (Jacobs, 2013), a *New York Times* reporter rated his experience of content as an A but learner interaction with peers as a B– and with instructors as a D.

Bob Samuels (2014), president of the University Council–American Federation of Teachers, argues a commonly held perception that online education undermines the social nature of education. He finds that the large lecture classes with multiple-choice tests to be the least effective at engaging learners, and he sees a parallel to online course. Samuels reports that "one educational commit-

tee at the University of California at Los Angeles argued, we should just move most of our introductory courses online because they are already highly impersonal and ineffective." This vision of online learning provides a possible explanation why some students worry that online education replaces the personal relationships that encourage deeper engagement with course content (Lewin, 2013) and why student isolation continues to be a major factor in dropout rates.

Interestingly, much of the recent literature on online instruction describes a shift in pedagogy brought on by online teaching. Online instructors write about their need to abandon traditional, teacher-centered, content delivery–oriented practice and embrace learner-centered methodologies when teaching online (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011; Farber & Metro-Roland, 2011; Junk, Deringer, & Junk, 2011; Travis & Rutherford, 2012; Ukpokodu, 2010). Huang (2002) wrote,

> Many commentators have argued that distance education requires a qualitatively new pedagogy built on a unique relationship between the instructor and the learners. . . . Constructivist principles provide ideas to help instructors create learner-centered and collaborative environments that support critical reflection and experiential processes. (pp. 27, 35)

The shift to online teaching has propelled discussion among institutions of higher education about teaching and learning, and for some faculty it has provided an opportunity to rethink and revamp pedagogy (Herman, 2012; Samuels, 2013; Ukpokodu, 2010). Given Bank Street's philosophical orientation as a progressive institution, the processes of teaching and learning online have not led to the invention of new pedagogies; rather, the investigation of shifts in methodologies as members of the faculty have created new online progressive practices.

Bank Street's Investigations Into Technology

Given Bank Street's foundation in the developmental interaction approach (Nager & Shapiro, 2000), the move into developing online courses has not been how to translate traditional teaching pedagogies into ones that support the development of learning communities but, rather, how to harness online tools to support existing pedagogy and continued reflection about best practices. Bank Street faculty members are well positioned to envision new online pedagogies that begin with fostering relationship and learner engagement. In an opinion letter to the *New York Times*, the former president of the Ford Foundation remarked that the "factors that will drive our national future—educational achievement, a healthy population, broad political participation and economic opportunity for all—depend in significant ways on how we structure and manage our spreading digital frontier" (Ubiñas, 2013). For Bank Street, the expansion of the digital frontier has meant building models of online instruction that adhere to institutional values while embracing the new possibilities for teaching and learning that digital technologies can bring.

There is a long history of technology use at Bank Street; for several decades, faculty have been investigating the relationship between the learner experience and technology. While Bank Street's first exploration with digital technology was in developing software for children (i.e., Bank Street Writer and Explorations of the Mimi), by the late 1990s, a core of Bank Street faculty started to systematically think about technology's application in the preparation of teachers. During that time, a series of initiatives supported faculty's integration of technology within their graduate-level courses as tools to enhance learning. In addition, early steps were taken in developing graduate-level online courses and experiences.

In 2000, the year that we joined the college, there was funding to support faculty in deepening their skills in applying technology to their work with graduate students and teachers in the field. As instructors, both of us had opportunities to engage in collaborative inquiry with other members of the faculty around the use of digital tools in classrooms with children. Members of the faculty incorporated and studied the impact of these technologies with their graduate students and with their graduate students' pupils.

In 2008, in response to an institutional mandate to create fully online degree programs, the college engaged in a more systematic approach to building a technology infrastructure. This included implementing faculty development, hiring more educational technologists, expanding graduate student support, as well as adopting new online learning tools and platforms. Faculty migrating courses to an online format needed support in thinking about ways to preserve and enhance their progressive pedagogy in an online context. Faculty development included a course for faculty who were creating or migrating fully online or blended courses. This course engaged faculty in a firsthand experience with online learning communities and provided faculty opportunities to share knowledge and reflect with colleagues.

It is within this larger institutional context that we decided to study our practices teaching fully online courses. The following section outlines the CoI framework that we used to analyze the construction of our courses and our underlying pedagogies.

CoI: A Conceptual Framework

The CoI framework examines online learning experiences through the lenses of cognitive, social, and teaching domains. CoI and the developmental interaction approach are grounded in constructivist and progressive approaches (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). While the three domains of CoI are interrelated, separately they provide a language with which describe the ways that online learning can be a deeply reflective and participatory experience grounded in a reciprocal learning community.

We argue that the foundational domain of CoI is the teaching presence, as it is the ongoing instructional choices of the teacher, many made before a course begins, that lays the foundation for the development of the social and cognitive presences. The teaching presence has been described as a "significant determinant of student satisfaction, perceived learning, and sense of community" (Garrison, 2007, p. 67). The teaching presence focuses on the design of experiences, facilitation as a shared responsibility, and direct instruction. The design of experiences includes the selection and organization of course goals, content, and materials; the development of learning activities; and assessment. Facilitation is conceived of as the shared responsibility of instructor and students in establishing participatory practices that deepen learning. Central to facilitation is the instructor's ability to establish personal presence (Scorza, 2005). Finally, direct instruction and modeling are apparent when the instructor presents, synthesizes, and analyzes course content, skills, and student thinking. One of the driving goals of the teacher presence in our practices is to construct conditions that are conducive to inquiry-based and collaborative learning.

Social presence in online learning is "the ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally, thereby being perceived as 'real people' in mediated communication" (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976, as cited in Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007, p. 159; see also Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). Social presence is the way in which students come to know the instructor, themselves as developing professionals, and one another as partners in a learning process. "The expression of emotion, feelings and mood is a defining characteristic of social presence" (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999). Online learning experiences are designed to support the expression of personal voice and presence while being structured so that students can work collaboratively to rethink, understand, and explore new and diverse ideas.

Garrison (2007) warned that instructors must make explicit the ways in which social presence supports learning. Social interaction is not in itself an end point. Successful online instructors make instructional goals clear so that students understand that community is developed to serve "common purposes and inquiry" (p. 63). Indeed, Dewey (1938) argued that successful learning takes place when individuals engaged in guided learning seek to interact with others. Online environments, which are set up for students to interact with one another, spur joint meaning making and thus learning.

Cognitive presence refers to the extent to which members can construct meaning through sustained reflection and discourse (Garrison et al., 1999). In the CoI framework, the meaning making occurs through "exploration, construction, resolution and confirmation of understanding" (Garrison, 2007, p. 65). While the instructor sets up the environment, learning happens through continuous social interaction and inquiry (Dewey, 1938). Some argue that the slower pace of online learning affords students more time to process material

and make personal meaning regarding information, which can lead to increased comprehension (Potvin, 2012; Ukpokodu, 2010).

Garrison and colleagues (1999) use the practical inquiry model to describe the cognitive presence online. In an educational context, online learners are guided through an experience that elicits problem solving and research into course content (Akyol & Garrison, 2011). The learners then assimilate the ideas developed during exploration of course content, often in collaboration, thereby constructing meaning. Finally, the online learners apply their learning by either constructing a "meaningful framework" or "discovering a contextually specific solution" (p. 236). Through interaction with course content and one another, learners come to understand and analyze information and synthesize meaning, applying new ideas and skills to support meaningful praxis.

Having defined the three presences and discussed the importance of each in the online learning environment, we now move to a description of how we created our online courses in light of a learner-centered progressive approach. Both of us taught fully online for the first time in June 2010. To gather data on our course construction, we examined syllabi, including resources and assignments; documents of group activities, including forums and presentations; recordings of synchronous sessions; and student work, complete with teacher and peer assessment. We coded and analyzed our data using the CoI framework.

The following sections describe the case study approach that we used to analyze our two courses—Developmental Variations II: Emotional and Behavioral Issues and Language Acquisition in a Linguistically Diverse Environment—and analyze the way in which the CoI framework sheds light on the underlying pedagogy of these courses.

Lessons in Online Pedagogy

Courses

Burr taught Developmental Variations II: Emotional and Behavioral Issues, and Otoya-Knapp taught Language Acquisition in a Linguistically Diverse Environment. Both are two-credit courses, required in a range of teacher preparation degree programs in general and special education. We both use discussion forums, case studies, and collaborative assignments as part of our course design. Developmental Variations II: Emotional and Behavioral Issues focuses on helping graduate students understand and meet the needs of children with emotional and behavioral disorders. Language Acquisition in a Linguistically Diverse Environment addresses theoretical and practical elements in classroom practices that enhance oral language development. It seeks to raise critical awareness about the importance of oral language devel-

opment in monolingual and bilingual children, particularly for children who do not share similar cultural or linguistic backgrounds as their teachers.

While the courses differ in content, at their core, they each explore issues of identity, equity, and access to learning from a social justice perspective for learners with diverse abilities and needs. We define *social justice* from a Deweyan perspective in which democracy and social justice are fostered by questioning social issues through a theoretical framework that critiques inequalities (Dewey, 1904/1965). We believe that teachers must understand the social, political, and historical factors that affect their pupils' social, emotional, and linguistic identities because these issues are central to all aspects of the school experience (Dewey, 1938; Ukpokodu, 2010).

In the following sections, we analyze our online pedagogy, specifically related to the way in which our instructional choices attended to the teaching, cognitive, and social presences. Specifically, we focus on precourse planning and orientation, the role of introductions, forum discussions, and groupings and collaboration.

Precourse Planning and Orientations

While some Bank Street graduate students have taken online courses, the majority have not (Crowley & Goss, 2011). If they had, their experiences previous to Bank Street were, more often than not, with more traditional "content delivery" models. Despite their near ubiquitous fluency in online social media, we found that we could not assume that graduate students had the same level of comfort and skill with using online environments for academic learning, particularly a model that would require such an intensive level of collaboration and learner-driven participation. An increased preference for technology in the classroom did not necessarily correlate to an increased proficiency in using technology for learning. Rieders, executive vice president of Global New Media for Cengage Learning, asserted,

> While today's college students are immersed and fluent in social media, consumer electronics and video games, they're not nearly as proficient when it comes to using digital tools in a classroom setting; this turns the myth that we're dealing with a whole generation of digital natives on its head. (Cengage Learning/Eduventures, 2010)

We therefore found that we needed to orient graduate students to not only the course structures and technologies but expectations around learner engagement and participation in an inquiry-based and constructivist online learning environment. This orientation would help lay the foundation for deeper student engagement. In addition, in not assuming that graduate students knew the dance, we explicitly addressed issues of equity, working to ensure that all graduate students had access to the learning spaces and opportunity for voice (Jaggers, 2011; Lim, 2004; Ukpokodu, 2010).

Toward this end, Burr drafted a statement for her syllabus, later adapted by Otoya-Knapp, outlining her expectations for a virtual community of learners and describing guidelines to support online collaborative inquiry. While the values and dispositions inherent in the statement hold true for face-to-face teaching, it was the act of teaching online that led both of us to state them so explicitly for our graduate students. As Dewey (1938) wrote, the enactment of a progressive philosophy cannot simply be "planless improvisation" (p. 28); rather, it requires "the shaping of actual experience by the environing conditions" (p. 40), which, in the case of the learning management system, is the virtual learning space.

Graduate students received this statement with other materials before the course began, in preparation for a discussion about their questions and goals. The statement about communication, style, and tone served multiple purposes. It made explicit values, expectations, and behaviors for online discourse and as such served as a direct expression of the teaching presence.

At the same time as we sought to convey our expectations, we used this statement as a tool to begin to model a collaborative process, asking our graduate students explicitly to consider one another as partners in dialogue and to add to community norms for online discourse. Toledo (2006) describes the instructor's role as one of guide, with the onus on the instructor to create an environment "where questions produce other questions" (p. 150). Burr wrote in her syllabus,

> The central concept of forum discussion is *discussion*, which implies a collaborative building of knowledge and understanding through interaction. This is quite different from most of the writing we do, which is more declarative in nature ("What I think is . . . ").

Burr drew heavily from Gallagher (2006), who described drawing on a tennis metaphor to help his students visualize the reciprocity of online dialogue. We emphasized with students the importance of their role in supporting deep cognitive engagement with course content and questions.

There were several other instructional choices that we made before and during the first few course sessions to orient graduate students to the architecture of the learning experience. These included describing communication venues and assigning precourse activities as a form of warm-up to the learning management system. This time spent on the expectations, procedures, and mechanics of the online space—all evidence of the teaching presence—served an essential role in allowing graduate students to enter the courses prepared to develop their social and cognitive presence online.

Explicit understanding of how to use, navigate, and interact in the learning management system environment was aimed at helping graduate students feel comfortable in the space and clear about course expectations. The rationale, based on research on the role of affect in learning, was that comfort in the space would allow learners to each express a personal identity and begin to

connect with others (Derakshan & Eysenck, 2010; Gable & Harmon-Jones, 2010; Immordino-Yang, 2011; Wenhai & Jiamei, 2009). This in turn would support deeper cognitive engagement with content. Inherent to the developmental interaction approach is recognition that learning is a social process, and so the construction of online learning experiences must foreground a deep understanding of the social and emotional domains of the learner experience. Thus, as important as the orientation to the learning space was the role of introductions.

The Role of Introductions

We created a series of experiences early in the semester that guided graduate students to introduce themselves and engage. In addition, they carefully planned for the ways in which they would introduce themselves and establish their roles in the online learning community. These introductory activities were grounded in course content; they oriented students to the learning management system and specific digital tools; and they modeled the type of learning community that would be developed throughout the semester.

In Otoya-Knapp's language acquisition course, the first forum discussion asked graduate students to introduce themselves by writing about their experiences as young children developing oral language. They wrote about their recollections, reflected on attitudes and perceptions embedded in their stories, posed questions, and responded to one another about perceived similarities and differences. In subsequent forum discussions, they made connections between their experiences and course readings related to standard American English and dialectal variation.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) argued that people "live in a community by virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common" (p. 4). Introductions provided a shared experience and allowed students to begin to establish a social presence, while orienting graduate students to expectations around cognitive engagement through the integration of course content and personal reflection.

We also introduced ourselves as instructors and as participants in the learning community. The Quality Matters rubric standards (2014) state that instructor introductions are an essential component of online course design. In addition to establishing the instructor's role, Otoya-Knapp's introductory video served as a model to one of the first assignments in which students introduced themselves to one another through the lens of their language experiences. Otoya-Knapp created and posted her video with a personal story about her experiences acquiring a second language. Modeling an introductory video was an informal yet structured conduit to establish her teaching presence, while helping orient students to the use of particular digital tools.

It also showed a more intimate view at the instructor's experiences with the content that she taught. Scorza (2005) writes,

> If we can manage to show empathy, respect, compassion and consideration to our online students, not only through our course materials, course policies, and pedagogical methods, but also with respect to how we present *ourselves*, they will feel that they have taken a class taught by a real person and not an automaton, and consequently, the teaching and learning experience will be enhanced for everyone. (p. 46)

We prioritized the development of social presence to build learning communities in which graduate students could take the intellectual risks that are essential in developing the cognitive presence (Garrison, 2007).

Forum Discussions

Central to students' cognitive engagement in each course was the forum discussion, which occurred during most sessions throughout each course. The forum is a space for structured online asynchronous discussion in small or whole groups around specific topics and questions. Through collective dialogic processes in the forum space, students build and rethink knowledge through articulating their ideas in writing and responding in kind to their peers and instructor.

In both courses, the forum was a space for discussion of readings, multimedia resources, case studies, and personal and professional experiences toward the development of graduate students' knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to each course's content and goals. The mere existence of forum spaces to discuss course content clearly does not automatically result in deep cognitive engagement; it is the task of the instructor, through the teaching presence, to create the conditions for critical inquiry and engagement. In his study on how to create rich online discussions, Beaudin (1999, in Toledo, 2006) found that "good questions promote active participation of the learner by stimulating various levels of thinking" (p. 153). Learners are asked to think critically about the questions that the instructor and their peers have asked and to pose their own. They are also asked to make connections to one another's thinking, as well as to course readings and resources.

While this emphasis on critical discussion mirrors methods of face-to-face instruction, the structure of written questions that guide forum discussions differs in significant ways from questions posed in real-time spoken conversations—hence, the emphasis in the literature on the kinds of questions best suited to engendering rich written discourse and encouraging exploration, reflection, and integration of new ways of thinking (Akyol & Garrison, 2011; Toledo, 2006). Using the CoI framework to analyze our practice, we both found that successful forum questions must be at once specific enough to encourage the development of deep cognitive presence around course content and open enough to allow learners freedom to explore complex ideas while integrating their own experiences and perspectives, thus explicitly inviting

the expression of social presence. Questions that were too broad, wordy, or multilayered—or, conversely, too narrowly focused on low-level comprehension of course material—tended to engender more superficial or tangential engagement. Verbal discourse allows for the layering of multiple questions, sometimes in quick succession. Questions for online discourse, however, must be able to serve as a spark without too much elaboration, and they are less easy to redirect midstream. The trade-off for less flexibility or spontaneity can be more intensely focused and considered inquiry.

Once launched, we found that online forum discussions required ongoing and visible teaching presence that balanced the need for instructor guidance and input with space for student ownership. Too much instructor voice—and conversations fell flat, as graduate students came to see their role as performing for the professor. Too little—and conversations could veer off course, or misunderstandings could stand uninvestigated. Successful facilitators help students push themselves and their peers to deepen and extend modes of online discourse by reflecting on their own patterns of participation. Scorza (2005) writes that active participation in discussion and dialogue are "essential for instructors who want to maintain a substantial online presence" (p. 48). Important signs of facilitation included weekly e-mails or videos and leaving "evidence" that the instructor had "been there" and had read postings in forums. Garrison (2007) argued that while the instructor is not to dominate the discourse, she or he must direct and facilitate to "establish cohesion and ensure messages are developmental" (p. 66).

We visited groups frequently yet typically waited until each member had posted once or twice before adding our voices. Instructor posts were generally short, aimed at deepening extending and, at times, clarifying the student discussion. Some instructor posts would simply be questions. When information was inaccurate or incomplete, we guided groups to new ways of considering an issue or to new resources. We also provided summaries of the forum discussions to the whole group. In addition, we shared stories from our classroom teaching that connected to research and theory. This explicitly modeled for students the ways in which social presence and experience are intertwined with cognitive engagement.

In a social justice–minded online course, it was extremely important to have meaningful discussions that challenged conventional thinking about the relationship among disability, language, class, race, and power. Thus, in creating the teaching presence, we were most attentive to creating safe spaces where students could really explore their beliefs, in light of critical social justice perspectives, and learn to talk to one another about these ideas.

Groupings and Collaboration

While the role of discussion in online learning is well represented in the literature (Aykol & Garrison, 2011; Garrison, 2007; Garrison & Arbaugh,

2007), less frequently addressed is the issue of groupings in online courses. Much literature on face-to-face instruction examines the use of whole and small groupings. Common findings are that large group discussions tend to feel more impersonal and less interactive, while small group discussions allow more equitable opportunities for participation (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012). We certainly found the parallel to be true online, if not magnified. Forum discussions with 20 to 27 graduate students (27 is the cap size at Bank Street College) are onerous to read, follow, and participate in. Individual voices get lost, and the quantity of text becomes simply unfeasible for student and instructor alike to manage. To address this issue, we grouped 2 to 5 graduate students in forum discussions, wikis, collaborative assignments, and other activities. Maintaining small group sizes and adhering to discussion protocols allowed each member to read and interact with the others' thoughts and ideas.

We varied their grouping strategies, beginning the semester by rotating group composition frequently and ending the semester in consistent groups that could serve as critical friends on assignments and activities. By the quarter mark, graduate students had had opportunities to engage in meaningful ways with all of their classmates in a small group context, thereby extending the range of social relationships and connections and supporting the full development of social presence online. Rotating groups frequently at first helped graduate students not feel stuck in one corner of the virtual classroom. The switch to consistent small groups around assignments and projects allowed them to develop deeper support networks as well as a community of more sustained inquiry, supporting the deepening of cognitive presence.

In addition to collaborative discussion, in both courses certain assignments had to be completed in partner groups or small teams. We found that we needed to plan carefully to support online collaborative work. One structure that we put into place was to ask the members of a team to complete a collaboration questionnaire in which they exchanged contact information and communication preferences, described their work habits, shared scheduling constraints, and expressed preferences about venues and methods for their online collaboration. Communicating personal information and preferred ways of working before embarking on the assignment helped students negotiate being members of a team, and it established accountability. Both of us found that requiring this level of explicit communication (an expression of the teaching presence) to be essential in an online context in which the absence of many communication cues—such as tone of voice, expression, even seeing who arrives early to class and who arrives late—can inhibit the ability of groups to work together successfully. Through expressing their social presence in a discussion of work style, preferences, and group dynamics, students are better able engage in a collaborative and cognitively demanding task.

Discussion

Recommendations

Several key recommendations emerge from our analysis of our courses. Our findings suggest that support for the affective domain was central to the methodologies that guided our instruction. Laying bare the architecture of the course, creating the conditions for students to know one another and the instructor, building forum discussions in which students integrated theory and practice, and actively supporting meaningful collaboration all required explicit planning for students to feel safe, engaged, heard, and confident about navigating their roles. Without these conditions, meaningful learning cannot occur. While the CoI framework addresses the importance of affective engagement within the domain of the social presence, we found that affect was inseparable from the development of online teaching and cognitive presences. Rather than be subsumed under the social presence, we recommend that the affective domain be considered a fourth dimension to the CoI framework and that further research explore the impact of the affective domain on successful online learning.

Another key finding was that it is possible to model social justice–oriented pedagogy online but only if this becomes an explicit part of the course design and architecture. Both courses focused on issues of equity and access, related to language and disability. Creating online spaces attuned to increasing graduate student voice through being able to successfully navigate the online space, co-construct learning with peers, and allow for personal expression and reflection modeled a pedagogy that we hoped graduate students would come to enact in their classrooms. While there is literature on constructivist approaches to online instruction, few studies look at the ways in which these approaches can serve as models of a critical pedagogy can be translated back into the K–12 face-to-face learning environment. We recommend that online instructors consider and plan for how their online courses can model democratic and constructivist pedagogies for future K–12 teachers who teach in increasingly diverse classrooms.

Limitations

A limitation of this case study was that we did not collect specific data related to graduate student learning outcomes. One reason for this was our decision to focus on our pedagogies; that said, we recommend further research in this area. Learning outcomes are complex to measure and are missing from much of the literature on online instruction. The field of online learning must collect more data on the impact that progressive online learning environments have on learners' growth and development as teachers.

Conclusion

Through analysis of our course pedagogies using the CoI framework, we found that it is possible to remain true to a progressive pedagogy within a virtual, digital context. While our online instruction did not undergo a shift in pedagogical approach, neither did it merely replicate face-to-face methods in a digital format. Our central findings are that online progressive pedagogy required deliberate shifts in instructional methodology. These shifts emerged organically and imperfectly, requiring ongoing collaborative reflection with colleagues and students as we developed new ways of teaching in an online world.

These methodological shifts included, first, making more visible the function and purpose of the architecture of the learning experience and, then, more explicit student and instructor roles in navigating and creating that experience. A second major shift was learning to support discussion online. For example, face-to-face questions and instructor interactions can be multiple, layered, repeated, and adjusted in a matter of seconds. We found that successful online discussion questions needed to be more deliberative, spare, and clear, necessitating the right balance between open and structured opportunities for participation. Last, to support successful collaboration online, we both found it necessary to model how the social presence supports successful online communication, to directly scaffold group interactions, and to think and plan more deliberatively for the ways that individuals within the group would come to know and be known by their peers in a variety of contexts.

Online courses need not be efficient vehicles for content delivery. Rather, they can be communities of inquiry that foster critical engagement through collaboration and critical analysis of content and course questions and themes. Online courses that seek to develop in graduate students an awareness of how structural, normative, and practical issues shape teaching and learning must cultivate participation, reflection, and trust. It is incumbent on the online instructor to create the conditions that foster these communities of inquiry. TEP

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