Section Introduction: Thinking about Online Practice
Helen Freidus

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As we move into the world of online education, it is important to consider not only the choices we make, but also how these choices relate to our vision of teaching and learning. Is there consistency between what we do and what we hope to do? Does our vision work in the service of all learners; if not, how can we reframe it to do so?

Much of online education appears to emerge from a transmissive paradigm. In this paradigm, bits of information are transferred from course instructor to the participating students (Freire, 1984). This is most clearly embodied in the prevalence of MOOC’s. Courses are constructed in linear, easily accessible ways. Knowledge is viewed as objective, and learning is defined as the acquisition of skills. There is little room for questioning or dialogue, for it is the content rather than the learner that is at the center.

However, online education can also emerge from a transformational paradigm, one in which knowledge is socially constructed. In these learning environments, dialogue is central; instructor and students are jointly responsible for creating a process through which all grow (Freire, 1984). Courses, so designed, acknowledge the importance of context, prior knowledge, learning style, and relationship. Enacting social constructivist perspectives, teacher and learners come to “see” and “know” more and differently; their worlds and their sense of possibility are extended (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978).
Transformational perspectives are widely supported in the literature of online research and theory (Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell, & Haag, 1995; Swan, 2005; Swan, Garrison, & Richardson, 2009). These theorists contend that student engagement is more effective when students have opportunities to interact with and learn from each other in varied forms of social interaction. Online students learn best from authentic tasks, meaningful problem-based thinking, and experiences in which they are able to negotiate meaning in relation-based contexts and then reflect on what they have learned (Jonassen et al., 1995).

The implementation of transformational learning environments is not always easy to accomplish. These environments go against the dominant discourse of current policy and practice and require new roles for both instructors and students. Describing her first experiences, Hummel (in Kelly, 2014) describes how when she first began to alter her expectations and encourage more generative discourse in online forums, some of her students pushed back and said, “I’ve taken an online course before, and this isn’t what we’re supposed to do. I just want to post and be done with it.”

Goss and Hummel (in Kelly, 2014) articulate their own pathway toward discovering how to create transparent expectations and support participants as they learn to engage in transformative learning. What is significant about their findings is that it becomes very clear that the process of developing and implementing transformative learning environments is complex for all involved. This is the challenge that the authors in this section have chosen to pursue in order to meet the needs of diverse learners. Their work offers new visions for our work in online settings.

REFERENCES
