Bridging the Gap: Online Teaching and the Disembodied Learning Experience

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Abstract

We now know much more than before about teaching and learning online. Online teaching shifts to the student as an individual within the learning community. Using Web 2.0 tools takes social presence to another level, communicating to the student that the instructors care about them. As in teaching in a face- to-face classroom, the class develops as a learning community. Students agreed that the collaborative online format facilitated their ability to find innovative and original solutions to creative problem solving challenges. Collaborative features facilitated survival of the solitary lifestyle of the distance learner. Students experienced freedom from face-to-face stress and excelled in the online courses. Online instructors need to continue to research innovative ways to combat the cold nature of text using a variety of tools such as blogs, discussion board "critiques", virtual chats, virtual office hours, and virtual groups. Support from Teaching and Learning Centers can afford online teachers a variety of innovative tools to enhance the collaborative online approaches in their curriculum.

Keywords: Blackboard Collaborate, Camtasia, Critique, Discussion Board, Negative/Positive, Synergy, Web 2.0, Wimba

1. Introduction

Questions about the nature of the disembodied online learning experience were raised by previous research into online communities (Miiller, Cohen and Smith, 2013).In this article, the authors wanted to research whether an online instructor's social presence and relationship to their students can facilitate survival of the solitary lifestyle of the distance learner, and whether there were substantial individual differences both between students and between classes with respect to online learning. Online versions of existing face-to-face studio courses work well as most of the objectives are suited to an online format with the substitution of online digitized images of student drawings (Miiller and Smith, 2009). The online development of Introduction to Drawing and Design is discussed in detail in *Online Development of 09105: Introduction to Drawing and Design* (Miiller, and Smith, 2007).

The quality of online learning was investigated in Shea and Bidjerano, 2009. They reviewed online learning outcomes as compared to the face-to-face class. They found that online learning was more successful and that students demonstrated higher levels of outcomes than students enrolled in the same face-to-face class.

Quinn (2011) found that online collaboration in critiques resulted in "the spirit of reckless abandon and creative anarchy," (p.23) compared to the more timid attitude of the students in the same class delivered in the classroom. Online courses are integrating collaborative and social approaches to learning through the use of Web 2.0 tools (Alexander, 2006). Affordances to learning online include the flow and immersion of discussion boards, critiques, student blogs, Camtasia, YouTube and video clips demonstrating drawing techniques. Synergy factors in student experiences play a role in online success such as banners, videos, and blogs. Virtual office hours using Wimba-enabled Voice Direct and Blackboard Collaborate, allow students to ask their questions live. Akins, Check and Riley (2004) conclude that such tools provided emotional safety and support in arts based distance learning courses, and Overby (2209) found that both shy and bold students experienced deep learning through social connections.

Connolly and Konarski found that peer self-concept was an important factor in learning among peers (1994). Han and Park, 2008, researched the online instructor's social presence and relationship to their students. Key theorists on distance learning pedagogies, believe that knowledge should be conveyed in learning communities (Ashcraft, Treadwell and Kumar, 2009; Zheng, Flygare and Dahl, 2009). Learning communities demonstrate Schein's (2004) definition of culture, as the group develops pervasive norms and values demonstrated in shared tacit assumptions. The most popular studies represented in the media compare the outcomes of online courses and programs to their face-to-face counterparts (Bernard, Abrami, Borokhovski, Wade, Tamim, Surkes and Bethel, 2009; Miiller and Smith, 2009).The authors found that face-to-face stress among peers can be a barrier to student learning and retention. In many instances, the online course excelled. This was especially true in discussion board "critiques", where students experienced freedom from face-to-face stress and were far more enthusiastic and forthcoming with their comments and constructive criticism. One student explained that participating in the online critiques caused her less anxiety. "In class, it feels like everyone is looking at me, I don't like being the center of attention. It makes me feel nervous and embarrassed. I didn't feel that online."Assignment of students to blogs and discussion board forums eased the burden of commenting so that everyone participated equally. The successful online version of a seated studio course using digital photographs of actual student drawings is demonstrated in *Distance learning in the visual arts* (Miiller and Smith, 2009). Students agreed that the collaborative online format facilitated their ability to find innovative and original solutions to creative problem solving challenges (Miiller, Cohen and Smith, 2013).

2. Teaching Tools

Engaging learning can be afforded through the use of Web 2.0 tools that take interactivity and social presence to another level (Beldarrain, 2006).Web 2.0 tools are a group of web-based technologies that expand communication options (Anderson, 2007). They can create an online environment that is innovative and with increased learning and success. Web-based tools enable the authors to show their presence online and communicate without sharing the same physical space. Using a variety of tools such as blogs, Blackboard Collaborate, calendar postings, discussion board "critiques" and forums, virtual chats, virtual office hours, and virtual groups communicates to the student that the instructors care about them. Blackboard Collaborate incorporates a virtual live classroom with a whiteboard and audio tools that can be archived for review (figure 1). Discussion board forums, though asynchronous, provide a forum for student questions, discussions and response, validating and reinforcing social interaction (figure 2). In a mixed method study, author Cohen (2013) found that a course implementing a combination of synchronous and asynchronous tools effectively helped students learn to draw. Further, online instructors need to find creative ways to combat the "cold" nature of text with a variety of tools. Virtual office hours using Wimba-enabled Voice Direct for example, allows students to ask their questions live. Camtasia and narrated powerpoints add a human element to presentations. Virtual museum visits and varied assignments such as group exercises contribute to learning and retention. The student's interviewed in Cohen's study reported that their optimal learning was a result of visual examples and video demonstrations of drawing techniques. Visual directions were especially vital for ESL students. Small group discussion protocols and their application to the online discussion forum is discussed in *Getting students to talk (and think)* (Burdick, 2011). Using a jigsaw protocol, small student groups studied different aspects of the course text. They used the discussion board to inform the class about their studied aspect building a more complete understanding of the text. Research into successful online learning strategies shows the value of a task can motivate the social nature of online learning (Lin, Lin, and Laffey, 2008).

Communicating, clearly stated expectations, sharing information, and maintaining a sense of community have been directly related to student perception of success in an online course (Palloff& Pratt, 2003; Kupczynsk, Ice, Wiesenmayer, &McCluskey, 2010).Clear expectations for students are posted every week on the homepage and course calendar. A link to the online bookstore and online library resources with a library reference person is posted so students can access these support services. The authors show their presence several times a week, even daily and use virtual office hours as well as other synchronous and asynchronous activities. Discussion board forums, though asynchronous, provide a forum for questions, discussions, reflection and response, validating students and reinforcing social interaction.

Online emails and messages were often used to clarify questions about instructions or due dates with daily replies by the instructor. Fast response to student emails (within 24hours), and a willingness to help with technical issues can help ease and address student fear of navigating online classes. Instructor participation in discussion board forums and voice threads are essential. Affordances to online learning include the "synergy", flow and immersion of student blogs, Camtasia, YouTube, video clips and video demonstrations of drawing techniques.
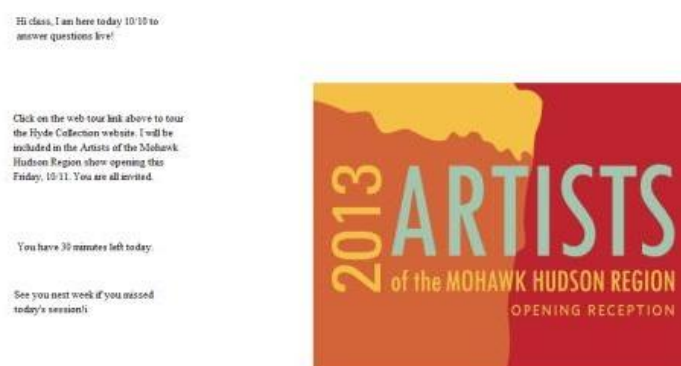

Figure 1: Screen shot of Blackboard Collaborate's "Whiteboard" During Virtual Office Hours

3. Online Communities and Collaboration

Student learning and retention online improves when there is a "community" of learners (Yang, Yeh, and Wong, 2010).Distance learning instructors are making use of important innovations in social software (Anderson, 2008).
As in face-to-face classrooms, the authors interact with and engage students and the online class develops as a learning community, developing intellectual and personal bonds. Online instructor presence is a critical factor for a student success (Brabazon, 2001; McKenzie, Mims, Bennett, & Waugh, 2000; Beaudin, 1999). Author Miiller launches her online classes with a "blog" and includes her personal and professional interests, including how to communicate and expected response times for students from their professor (within 24 hours). Students post an introduction to get to know one another by including personal and career interests with photos using Flickr and other web 2.0 tools.Online communities have been defined as the connection among and between students and their instructors that led to increased learning (Young & Bruce, 2011). Cohen (2013) concluded that a virtual culture mediates collaboration and the co-construction of knowledge in virtual critiques. In grounded theory interviews, students discussed making tacit assumptions about virtual social protocol, including balancing "being nice" with demonstrating a respect for online boundaries. Increasingly, online courses are integrating collaborative and social approaches to learning through the use of Web 2.0 tools (Alexander, 2006). Affordances to learning online include the flow and immersion of these tools versus the "cold text" of discussion boards, student blogs, Camtasia, YouTube and video clips demonstrating drawing techniques. Synergy factors in student experiences play a role in online success such as banners, videos, and blogs. The role of internet social networking communities was investigated in Fogel and Nehmad (2009) and also in Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, and Espinoza (2008).

"How to Look at Art" Discussion Board Forum

☐	How to Look At Art ?	Sameer D.	1/28/13 1:34 PM
☐	RE: How to Look At Art ?	Allison S.	1/29/13 9:54 AM
☐	RE: How to Look At Art ?	Courtney E.	1/29/13 2:43 PM
☐	RE: How to Look At Art ?	Lauren O.	1/29/13 5:46 PM
☐	RE: How to Look At Art ?	Thomas O.	1/30/13 2:44 PM
☐	RE: How to Look At Art ?	Bianca S.	1/30/13 9:18 PM
☐	RE: How to Look At Art ?	Teresa M.	2/1/13 7:36 PM
☐	RE: How to Look At Art ?	Professor Miiller	2/4/13 10:18 AM

Figure 2: Discussion Board Forum with Student Responses to a Reading

The willingness to share information by those with a "proself" as opposed to a "prosocial" orientation was investigated by Wodzicki, Schwämmlein, Cress,and Kimmerle, (2011).The investigators found that those who put more emphasis on their personal benefit ("proself"),can be increased socially by providing photographs of the other group members. Mesch and Talmud found that online friendship formation and social closeness contributed to better communication among peers (2006).To facilitate the sense of a community of online learners, an "About Me" essay and blog assignment is the first exercise of the semester for Online Art Criticism (figure 3).Students use many Web 2.0 tools in their blogs such as Prezi and Flickr. An "About Me" blog is posted by the teacher so that students get a sense of their Professor as a person rather than someone typing responses and instructions (figure 4).

About Me: Michelle

   My dad was obsessed with the Beatles, hence my name. My favorite season is Fall because of hoodie weather, perfect climbing conditions, pumpkin everything, great photograph opportunities, and the start of football season.

Climbing is a major part of my life. I have climbed a lot in the world-class 'Gunks as well as the White Mountains, High Cascades, and the Cordillera Blanca. I'm also in the process of becoming a rock guide. I spent the past summer in Peru as my second time international. I flew down alone, not knowing anyone or where I was going. My first stop was Cusco, where I began the 5 day Salkantay Trek which ended with a visit to Machu Picchu. After that, I was on my way to Huaraz where I spent two months as a member of the American Climber Science Program Expedition.

A *rest day at Alpamayo Col Camp (5500m/18,045ft)*

Figure 3: A Student "About Me" blog

Figure4: Screen shot of Professor Miiller's "About Me" blog

A student in Online Drawing (Cohen, 2013), compared the critique experience to giving a presentation in face-to-face classes explaining that even when the instructor asks students to be critical, voicing negative comments violates a student code, "You just don't want to make that person's job any harder." Another explained that even critical comments on the discussion board are framed in a positive way. Another student described offering critical comments via an email message to protect her peer's privacy. Students share the success of the online critique blogs: "Steve" consulted the critique blog to give him a sense of his progress in the class compared to other students. He mentioned that in an online class, it is hard to know if you are on the right track, or if you are doing the assignments right. He described "getting lost in some of the styles in the book. When I see someone do it, I can get it." When queried, he explained that he did not understand that there was room for interpretation in the assignments. "I did have difficulty with some of the work. I went in to look at everyone else's, to see how I was doing, there were some that were so good, and there were others that, I don't want to say they were bad, but made me feel better about mine. It felt good to read the comments, when people didn't leave comments, I felt that my drawing wasn't good."Figure 5 shows an actual discussion board critique with student comments from Online *Introduction to Drawing*.

Negative/ Positive Drawing Critique Board

Post your drawings here! I want you all to comment on 2 classmates' drawings each

Ashley W.: For this project I decided to place one chair upside down on the other. Come to find out, it made this project difficult in drawing the negatives but I think it came out decent.

RE: Negative Positive drawing by Ashley W.

Comment by Michelle

Your drawing was amazing. I love the idea of a mirrored image side by side almost merging together. Even with the attached pieces it's clear to see that it's two older antique style chairs. The details in the chair legs to make them appear 3 dimensional really shows in your drawing. It's very original and I think you took a different approach making it stand out even more. Great job.

Comment by Kerri

I think you should be more proud of yourself! You did a great job! The 3d effect looks amazing and I like your shading to accent the chair as it put more emphasis on the chair itself. I believe this was a difficult drawing as well but you made it through it and did well!

Comment by Kaylie

This came out great! I love black finger tips too, lol for me though, its more like black-everything always ends up on my face somehow.

Comment by Michelle

I too found this difficult. The concept of creating a picture without actually drawing it isn't exactly working out for me. Invisioning 3D objects on paper and making them appear that way instead of just being flat is very difficult to create on paper. This is an assignment I'd love to see an example done first hand in person. For me, I had to choose a simple object, something not 3 dimensional like a butterfly profile or full body of the butterfly or a simple flower like a daisy. I felt like it was taking the safe way out, but after attempting it, trust me, it's really not that easy! I messed up and kept drawing the object, instead of the background so it's hard to change that though process. The frame of a chair might work for you, but I think it will be hard to draw without appearing flat, hard for the non artist like us I mean! I can't wait to see the finished drawing.

Comment by Kailin

I love the director's chairs! Did you get them from pier 1 imports? Haha

Figure 5: Negative Positive "Critique Board" Student Comments

Students agreed that the online format facilitated their ability to find innovative and original solutions to creative problem solving challenges. The collaborative feature of the critique acted as their touchstone, an informal peer review process, and reassurance that they were interpreting directions and fulfilling the criteria of the assignment. Another student described the critique as being an integral part of surviving the solitary lifestyle of the distance learner. However, they indicated that participation in critiques was not always an easy process. Students talked about not knowing what to say, or the fear of saying the wrong thing. They observed the work ethic of others with a critical eye, noting the time spent on drawing assignments. Students referred to returning to their work and making adjustments and corrections based on observations of other works and comments posted. An unspoken culture emerged; if a lengthy comment was left, it saw a positive one, and this meant your work was accepted by your peers. Highly original, divergent interpretations of assignments were especially honored and respected by students. This raises interesting questions about the nature of the disembodied online experience. In an on campus class, students drawing in close proximity often influence the work of their classmates, sometimes manifesting in convergent outcomes.

4. Conclusions

We now know much more than before about teaching and learning online. The priority in online teaching must be the learners: the interaction and engagement of students with the concepts and skills of the course (Boettcher, 2007). Online teaching shifts to the student as an individual within the learning community, and how both the teacher and the student create an online learner community. Mansead, Lea, and Goh (2011) conclude that implied personal relationships in a virtual environment creates increased social awareness.

Using tools such as announcements, blogs, calendar postings, discussion board forums and postings communicate to the student that the authors care about them. As in teaching in a face- to-face classroom, the authors interact and engage students and the class develops as a learning community, developing intellectual and personal bonds in an online learning environment.

Collaborative features facilitated survival of the solitary lifestyle of the distance learner. Engaging learning can be afforded through the use of Web 2.0 tools that take interactivity and social presence to another level (Beldarrain, 2006).Highly original, divergent interpretations of assignments were an unexpected benefit in online learning supporting the idea that there can be a highly qualitative aspect to the nature of the disembodied online learning experience. Thomas and Brown (2011) believe that when students engage as members of a collective in virtual spaces, they learn from each other, proving the power of the whole exceeds the sum of its parts in problem solving expertise. Student learning and retention online improves when there is a "community" of learners.

Less face-to-face pressure affords enthusiastic commenting in discussion board forums and blogs. Virtual culture further tempers the stress by demonstrating a respect for other student's privacy, and helps build community. Students in online versions of a studio course showed consistent development of skills, developed artistic potential, and explored processes, materials, and approaches to the creative experience with no loss of quality as compared to the seated version.

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