

Virtual and Face-to-Face Learning: Meeting Points

Paper presented at La Formacion Virtual En El Nuevo Milenio
Madrid, 15-16 June, 2000

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Abstract

This paper examines how teaching within a traditional classroom benefits from insights and techniques developed through online teaching. A critical assumption underlining the presentation is that much online instruction will be performed by faculty members who, as part of their workload, also teach traditional face-to-face classes. It is important for distance learning advocates to identify and encourage synergistic feedback between teaching online and teaching in the classroom. Being able to demonstrate how an instructor's traditional way of teaching may benefit from online teaching and *vice versa* helps contribute to the overall improvement of instruction. Motivation to teach well regardless of format is enhanced if it can be demonstrated that instructional performance improves by virtue of alternating venues. Additionally, inculcating a reflective approach to teaching regardless of modality achieves important pedagogical goals for faculty and students alike. The format follows a journal I kept in my graduate seminar, "Leadership in Organizations," during the Spring 2000 semester.

Introduction

In Spring 2000 I taught the graduate seminar "Leadership in Organizations." It was the sixth or seventh time I had given this course which I originated several years earlier. It answered a need for a leadership course on campus and also my own desire to study leadership. With one exception when I taught the course online last year, I have always taught it face-to-face. The online version was very satisfactory. There were so many things about that experience which I enjoyed including the frequency of interaction between students and instructor, its intensity, the emphasis on writing, the opportunity for reflective observation, and the flexibility in structure offered through asynchronicity. I began to wonder if and how my teaching in the conventional classroom would be affected by this online teaching. My journal, kept during the semester contains reflections on course structure, content and materials, class interaction, assignments and grading, modes of presentation, quality issues for students and instructor, and satisfaction.

Journal of “Leadership in Organizations”

19 January 2000

It is the first session of my seminar and I am waiting for the students to arrive. How many will be on time? I am starting late ... very concerned about getting off on a good footing. I did not mail out the materials to them in advance; I do that with my online course. By way of contrast I will be reviewing the syllabus at this first class session- a waste of time?

All the disagreeable habits of students- arriving late, eating in class, appearing bored, and yawning! There are 14 students. I have to keep in mind the immediacy of the classroom. Beware of gaffes. Beware of appearing impatient and anything resembling condescension. In this face-to-face course I am looking forward to doing all the things I could not accomplish when I last taught this class online a year ago: showing parts of movies in class, bringing in guest speakers, having case discussions in real time. I am starting tonight with a video of Martin Luther King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

24 January 2000

Reflections several days after my first class: It was very exciting. The dynamism of being live and creating a mood/environment; an exciting climate. Drawing people in... a performance. Reaching out in real time and getting a response. This could be intimidating for students since they are very often accustomed to large classes where they can be in a passive mode. Actually this is one singular feature of my face-to-face course- a very high level of student participation. An example of one crossover benefit. I will distribute a feedback instrument at the third session to see how it is going.

Maybe I was a little “over the top” at my first session. Conscious of the fact that I am not continuously “logging into” my class as I would if it were online. I don’t really have to do anything until the next session a few days from now. I will work a little bit today and look at the assignments and maybe refresh myself on the readings and course syllabus. Also check enrollment and see if anyone has dropped out since I told the students how hard it would be, especially how much writing would be required. This is another “carryover”- I require more writing since teaching electronically. Spoke with three students who arrived late (no late electronically where we log on aysnchronously). Found out that two dropped out and three new students enrolled for a net gain of one.

26 January 2000

Yesterday was a snow day and we cancelled classes. But tonight we are back in business. There is still plenty of ice around and by sundown it will be very treacherous. How many students should I expect? I am guessing that five or six will not make it (a surprise- almost all came). They will use the weather as an excuse. Maybe that is how I really feel? I personally would not be so eager if I had to drive at night. So it is my second class and because of the weather we will

not quite be up to speed. In the electronic course weather is a non-issue.

The first class, although fun, is by nature an introduction. Moreover, it is necessary to dismiss them early so that they can go to the bookstore and buy books- students expect it. However I noticed this year that several of my students purchased their books from online bookstores. They are becoming less dependent on the physicality of the college.

Does a face-to-face class use less of my time? Although I think about my class often, I only actually *do* something when I am physically with my students. By way of contrast, if the course is online, I can contribute to discussions whenever I want. The same for the students. In face-to-face we must “save up” our contributions to the next week.

27 January 2000

The 3rd class was OK. We went the distance, the full 2 ½ hours. Mood is an issue. At one point things were a little tense. The class worked in groups to discuss the leadership case studies. This was not as rich as I imagined it would be. Might work better online. Something to try next semester when I teach this seminar asynchronously again.

31 January 2000

Grading papers. I am also setting up a distribution list (DL) for the students in the class although not all of them have access to email. I wonder if I make this a condition of the face-to-face class next time I do it and teach the course as a “hybrid”? How would this work? Unless all have access to it, I think the DL will be a very limited form of additional feedback between us. But, who knows?

1 February 2000

Getting some response to my emails...more connections between us. I want to experiment to put additional technology into the class. Back in the fall semester I met several times with the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) staff to see what options were open to me. Tony Scarlatos was very helpful and assigned three undergraduate students to assist me. But I did not have enough time to do the work required for restructuring my course. Basically I was to set up a data base of leadership characteristics. And the students in my class would then use this information to “construct “ on their computers an ideal leader whose behavior could be tested in a variety of simulated situations. It was a good idea but it would have required me to re-design the course. I was also using two new texts for the first time and I guess I could not absorb any additional innovation this time around. We will still be using the computer lab, but I am not sure how. Too bad, however.

“Quality” in teaching requires that the instructor stay excited and involved in the material, continually turning it over in one’s mind, thinking about new relationships, and especially new ways of bringing it alive. Especially in a subject like leadership, how does one bridge theory and practice? The research base is colored so much by the subjective values of the scholars. I can see for myself how the values and prejudices of my students have shaped their concepts of leadership. Hardly anyone in my courses esteems *production* in the same way they do *quality of*

interaction between leaders and followers. Most of all they prioritize “being nice.” Yes, it is important to me too. I want to be treated well. But now, I am beginning to see things from the perspective of senior management. What a joke. A big joke, since for so long I wanted to be known by the quality of my relationships. Is it because I have become cynical about relationships at work? After fourteen years of trying to please everyone as Dean and trying to have a strong, supportive climate at work, what do I have? Do people work as hard and produce as much as they possibly can? And what about my assumptions underlying “creativity”? Minimizing fear of failure? I try. Is there enough innovation? Am I deluding myself about my own leadership abilities? Maybe in teaching this term I will be able to reach a number of important understandings.

3 February 2000

My Feb. 2 class was good but exhausting! I need to be more disciplined and not go off on too many tangents. I find that one question leads to another and before I know it I am miles away from where I started. Perhaps the “linearity” of the session has to be questioned as if that quality is a virtue. Maybe this is better- to start here and go there. The excitement, and unpredictability. I tend to think of the lecture as a “set piece” like a chapter in a book. Fifteen lectures all in a row. And *presto*, the course is neatly packaged. Also the lecture is designed to be highly distilled and to encapsulate some difficult and important material. But, I must remember that this seminar is deliberately designed as a discussion class, not a lecture course. Also, aren't my online courses non-linear and instead “elliptical”? We circle around, teasing at the issue from many different vantage points. It is not a straight assault on the summit. Rather one must circumnavigate, switching back and forth before the pinnacle is attained. If you know your material, the “live” class can be the ultimate test...you can build on your material and create in the same way a picture is painted. Moving around- the edges, the middle, color here and then there. Not from the left to the right like a typed page of manuscript. Not from the top to the bottom. Bits and pieces, phrases and explorations here and there. Eventually it is done. The picture is painted. The class is over. What is “done”? It is simply a point at which you choose to stop.

It is enjoyable to “go with the flow” and let the dynamic of the course carry you along. The spontaneity. But there is fatigue when you are done. Isn't this similar to the concept of flow introduced by Csikszentmihalyi? It just carries you along and you can do your best work and it is energizing *while in the moment*. I have to look at his book again. Shari (my daughter) mentioned this to me a few weeks ago. The task can't be too easy or too hard. Just hard enough to provide an attainable challenge. Enough of a challenge? We want university work to be hard. Rigorous. Frustrating. If it is easy, we are suspicious. Too much fun and frivolity is to be avoided. Especially in the classroom and in scholarship. But, what about “play” and creativity? Many authors cite this connection and it is generally accepted. At the same time there is the aphorism attributed to Edison about creativity being “1% inspiration and 99% perspiration”? No simple formula. Creativity is where you find it. That certainly is the context/systems perspective.

I notice in my class that it is very difficult to obtain perspective on my teaching in real time. That is, to back off, and see myself and thereby evaluate what I am doing. There is no “delay” or “pause” button to press. Maybe online teaching will appeal to those who want to carefully craft

their classes and the *live* classroom for the riskier performer? Then it could be extending the options for college teaching by expanding the variety of venues. Different strokes for different folks?

When I anticipate a face-to-face class and I am confident I find the prospect thrilling. What kinds of connections will I make tonight? If I am filled with doubt, what kinds of mistakes, pratfalls and embarrassments await me? I remember when I was talking about one of the leadership cases (“The Case of the Reluctant Leader”) about a controversial AIDS curriculum for children and in doing so I mentioned the risk to adults. I was embarrassed to have brought this up.

The traditional classroom revolves around the faculty member...no question. But it can be just as student-centric. Undeniably however, the format favors our control, just as in the electronic classroom, the numbers favor the students unless I want to stay online all the time and dominate the electronic conversation. My greater experience in the face-to-face setting makes me feel like a virtuoso, something I have not yet developed in online teaching. With additional experience it is reasonable to assume that I will attain mastery in that format too.

11 February 2000

On February 9 I had a *gestalt* experience in my class when a certain relationship between ideas became clear to me at once. I know it happens in writing too, but perhaps it is more visceral when it takes place while talking out loud. But perhaps not. Still, it is great when it takes place. I experienced great fatigue in my last class after two hours. It made it harder for me to generate enthusiasm and be responsive to my students. I think I just droned on. Ugh!

15 February 2000

At my talk last night at the Library Directors seminar I used three different kinds of media- chalk board, overhead projector, and video. I moved back and forth using each. I think this was a successful session with drama and intensity, also very interactive. In the online environment I am still very text based. This will change as computers develop with greater capacity. In the meantime score another one for the live class.

16 February 2000

I was too tired to teach tonight. I think I am doing too much this semester and am paying the price with exhaustion. Instead of “teaching” I “lectured.” Like G. B. Shaw. Or was it Johnson? I think he once wrote that he was too tired to write a short letter so he wrote a long one. I was too tired to *talk* with them so I talked *at* them. No community.

How do you measure community? It doesn't mean just showing up and being prepared to listen, or speaking when you are called upon. Is it more like belonging to a club where you feel you are welcomed and belong? Community is voluntary. I can hold myself aloof, apart. Or I can be a part of it and work to keep it alive. A most elusive quality. Like leadership...we can recognize its presence or its absence. But oh so hard to fabricate on demand. Transcending the gap between personal and impersonal is one way. There are tricks in getting people to share, “icebreakers” they are called. I remember once a rather long online discussion within AEDNET (Adult

Education Network, an online listserv) in which people shared their favorite icebreakers. I printed a few out...but where did I put them? I can go to the listerv and ask someone if they still have them handy. Neat!

24 February 2000

An observation: Teaching is an example of “thinking through” with others, in public. The best teaching successfully involves students in this process. Interpersonal skills help students participate in this manner. The unusual combination of ideas, unplanned and unpredictable, help students see the fun in learning as well as its excitement. People-to-people exchanges with very dense data. Very unique and satisfying.

29 March 2000

I’ve missed writing in my journal for almost a month. Experiencing the “middle innings” of my course, the point when the semester seems to be just dragging on and on. We show up, talk; I collect their papers and then go home. I told some jokes last night. It is like we are all in a ship’s cabin making a long voyage together. There is no way out (Sartre’s No Exit?) We have to make do with each other. Why must the college term be fifteen weeks? Back in the winter before this class started I thought about shortening my seminar to nine weeks. But I didn’t do it.

2 May 2000

Tomorrow is my final session of the seminar. It has been a long term. I made all the sessions save one, when I was in the city and Manny London covered for me. Otherwise I taught them all myself, no guests. Having guests was one of the things I had wanted to do and missed in my online classes. Yet, I didn’t follow through when I had the chance this term. Why was that? In the past I just did it. Why? Maybe I was less organized this term? Maybe I had not given enough thought to where I could bring someone in? Or maybe it had to do with the quality of the guests themselves? In the past all were leaders (the university president, the state senator, a university vice president, etc.) who never took courses in leadership. It seemed like I was holding them up to be examples. Each time one stated that he or she never studied how to be a leader I felt that it actually undermined the premise of the course which is that study and reflection-in-action contribute to improved performance. I’ve got to think more about how to integrate guests for the future since this was a dimension which students liked. An alternative to my style?

I changed texts. and modified some assignments, and came up with something brand new...the Leadership Field Project. But I didn’t do much to change the nature of things once we were under way...and I thought the real time element would enable me to do that. And I didn’t

Conclusions

What then is involved in crossing educational “platforms”? It appears to be just minor variations in behavior as I work to reinterpret and reinvent the subject material, trying, above all, to keep it fresh for my students and myself. Can I list some differences? This term I could hand out some material from a book. Without a scanner (I don’t have one) I can’t do this in my online

course. But soon I will. The online course keeps me constantly checking my email. I don't do this for my seminar. I just show up. Maybe that is why online students report greater "community"- they are always interacting with each other, not just once a week. And I notice, if I miss a class, it is a big blow to my feelings of belonging. It must be true for them too. Actually, in a face-to-face course meeting once a week, the ties of community are fragile indeed. That is why attendance and participation must be emphasized. So let's assume that community is weak in face-to-face courses. This would be exactly the opposite of what critics of electronic courses allege. They have not yet experienced the reality of online community. What will they say then?

"Faculty don't get to *know* our students in electronic courses " is another criticism. Of course in face-to-face courses this is only true for those who teach to very small groups. And let me look at my own experience this term. Whom do I know in my class of 14? There are some who participate with enthusiasm, others, I must drag it out of them. It is a potentially coercive environment and everyone must feel the potential for manipulation and embarrassment. Overcoming this is neither easy nor trivial matter. It is part of what Parker Palmer addresses in The Courage to Teach. How do his observations translate into the electronic environment? I must check this out.

What did being in real time do? It enabled me to come to class with very little preparation and to give a lecture, or to think out loud. And to command their focus. Have human contact. Bask in their glory. I don't think it was pedagogically rich. We think it is better, face to face. Yet, according to Bill Pelz at Herkimer County Community College, faculty who do distance courses feel re-invigorated. Perhaps, in face-to-face the truth is that the *affect* can get in the way. The emotionality of the classroom can be its biggest strength and greatest weakness. Also, students expect you to do all the work and resist rigorous and extensive class participation. And it is so easy to fall into this role and be a "star." Also, too many external factors influence grading and the accurate assessment of their learning. Who looked awake and who didn't? Who participated more often? Neat attire. Promptness and punctuality. Submitting assignments on time. The proper use of English. All of these had a bearing on the final grades. Also my desire to be liked gets in the way. My enthusiasm often fell victim to how I perceived my own performance more than anything else. The classroom is vague and ambiguous; isn't that the truth!

Perhaps next year I will teach a hybrid class that is face-to-face supplemented by an online dimension and see how it works. Could that be the ideal synthesis? What it boils down to is keeping young and alive in the class; giving it your best, and to keep experimenting. Maybe the lesson I learned this term is to make the most of *whatever* modality is being deployed and to continuously rethink my approaches to teaching.

References

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