Blended Learning Dialogue and Reflection

A change in quality, depth and sophistication of communication?
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What did correspondents feel that they could say in letters but nowhere else? What do letters tell us about what formerly it meant for people to be present and absent to one another? What possibilities for the creation of human relationship were (and for some people still are) promoted by a practice that negotiates distance between persons through the comparatively slow material exchange of written texts? And finally, in view of our increasing reliance on telephone contact and e-mail, what possibilities for the creation of human relationship are served by the minimal materiality and virtual instantaneity of electronic medium?

(Decker, 1998, p. 4)

The Faculty of Nursing at the University of Calgary has offered a Family Nursing undergraduate course for many years. This course addresses the theory and practice of family nursing, and has over the past seven years incorporated practice labs that constitute about one half of the contact hours of the course (Moules & Tapp, 2003). The labs are divided into groups of 10 students with one instructor per group. In 2002, Dr. Dianne Tapp initiated the use of a web-based bulletin board as a medium for sharing student reflections about their experiences in the family nursing labs. Within their small lab groups, students were expected to offer brief one page postings of reflective writing related to their learnings in the family labs and an equal number of postings of responses to their classmates' reflections. Students were encouraged to write about particular learning instances from the family labs, exploring ideas and practices that were meaningful to them. The first experimental use of this reflective assignment replaced the previous evaluative practice of having the students produce a reflective paper at the completion of the labs.

The responses to this first attempt of incorporating WebCT resulted in a resounding affirmation of the ways that the use of WebCT opened up the learning and the reflective practices of the students and of the instructors. Instructors and students alike expressed recognition of the influence of this new exercise. Instructors who were familiar with the old evaluative practice noticed a profound difference in the levels of reflections offered throughout the course on WebCT. One might hypothesize that WebCT allowed for more interaction between the lab members and the chance to reflect on others' reflections; it also offered more immediacy between the learning and the reflections. The instructors of the family labs responded to student postings with their own reflections. Students and instructors were drawn into this reflexive/reflective relationship, in dialogue with written words, learning moments, and each other (Moules & Tapp, 2003).

In the winter term of 2003, I, as the family nursing course lecturer and coordinator, implemented the use of WebCT in the same manner as initially conceived by Dr. Tapp. At the completion of the second effort to teach in this manner, the fit of using WebCT in this context and around this content of the very relational and reflective practice of family nursing is clearly apparent, although the reasons are still speculative. The level of reflections of the students have shifted from what was often more of an attempt to summarize and recap the content of the labs to something that is highly more sophisticated, thoughtful, and reflective. One might hypothesize that it is the immediacy of the response that adds this deepened character of reflexive capacity, but I suspect the reasons are more complex than this. There is something about the nature of "posting" something for others' eyes and not just for an evaluative response

from the instructor that seems to be at play in the effectiveness of this tool. There is also something about the distance and safety of communicating on-line that suggests that perhaps it serves to free students to offer an intimacy of reflection that might be too difficult in the moment or in person. In the responses to their peers' reflections, I noticed a consistent respectfulness, thoughtfulness, and yet another level of thinking and reflection that might not have occurred in discussion, or that certainly might have occurred differently. The next layer that was added occurred within the responsive postings of the instructors to the reflections of the students, the offering of more questions, and often of their own reflections. This, in turn, seemed to elicit yet another layer of response from all the students in the group. What became apparent in my review of all 240 postings in this course and of the 240 responses from instructors is that there was a change in quality, depth, and sophistication of reflective postings as the labs evolved. The beginning postings were more tentative, even shy, but as each student and instructor added their own reflections, there was a marked change in quality of reflections, depth of analysis, and integration of content.

Would the quality of the reflective postings be as strong if the communication were solely through WebCT? I suspect, in this case, not. I believe it was the blending of the face-to-face contact and the discussion board contact that increased the effectiveness and meaningfulness of both ways of communicating and learning.

In my own doctoral research, I studied the use of letters in therapy as extensions of clinical sessions with families. One finding was that the letters that were most effective were those that captured and communicated the tone of both the writer and the relationship (Moules, 2003). The reflective postings in this course did seem to both capture and communicate particular tones. Having not been involved in the labs, I cannot offer whether the tone communicated truly captured the tone of the lab experience, but in my objective and outsider readings of the postings, I believe that a particular tone was communicated, a tone that I suspect is true to the tone of the labs and the relationships that formed within them. I wondered if the students, for whom email has become one of the most widely used modes of communication, found a familiar form to cultivate and communicate their thoughts. Perhaps in finding themselves at home in electronic thinking and communicating, the use of WebCT allowed a comfort, confidence, and willingness to entrust their reflections to this medium.

RESPONSE/COMMENTARY

D. R. Garrison

Online learning represents a relatively new and transforming educational experience. The reason being is that communication is at the heart of an educational experience and online learning fundamentally alters the mode and quality of the communication. At the core of online communication is asynchronicity and connectivity. That is, the ability to communicate within a community without space and time constraints. Moreover, the asynchronous nature of the written communication adds a reflective and permanent character to the communication. When combined with spontaneous and fast-paced verbal communication in a face-to-face context (i.e., blended learning), thoughtful and deep learning is only limited by the imagination of the design.

Expanded communication and interaction opportunities (without massive infusion of resources), is evident in the blended learning experience described by Dr. Moules. The value of online learning goes well beyond access to information. The true potential of online learning is its capacity to support communication and facilitate critical thinking. While we still have much to learn about how to combine the properties of direct and mediated communication for educational purposes, it is clear that deep and meaningful learning conversations (i.e., discourse) can be cultivated in an online learning environment. It may well be the means to once again achieve the commonly accepted ideal of higher education, a critical community inquiry, in times of limited financial resources.

For more information regarding the potential of blended learning see
http://www.center.rpi.edu/

References

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