Chapter 10

Breakthroughs, Breakdowns, and Some Productive Pedagogical Paradoxes of Virtual Learning

Vachel Miller
Appalachian State University, USA

Kelly Clark-Keefe
Appalachian State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Learning sites in higher education have become more diffuse, diverse, and tangled. As instructors, we can hybridize our encounters with students, meeting them one week in class; another week, in virtual space. Our initial experimentation with hybrid learning has left us face-to-face with breakthroughs, break-downs, and deep pedagogical dillemmas. In this chapter, we voice our emergent sensibilities about the transformative potential—both for our students and ourselves—of inhabiting a hybrid learning environment. Our discussion is based on our observations of doctoral students' interaction and engagement on-line, as well as our own embodied sensitivities about how we, as instructors, experience ourselves and our work in the pedagogical movement between our classrooms and virtual space.

WHERE ARE WE (VIRTUALLY)?

We situate our discussion as a contribution to the scholarship of e-teaching and learning. This form of scholarship invites critical reflection on our own teaching practice, to enrich our self-understanding and contribute to pedagogical knowledge in relation to online learning (Benson & Brack, 2009). A recent review of a small sample of e-learning journals suggests that critical reflexivity within the scholarship of teaching and learning online has been given little space in professional literature (Benson & Samarawickrema, 2008). Our impression is that e-learning scholarship tends to favor an objectivist epistemology—particularly fascinated with empirical comparison of the virtual with the traditional classroom—and that this scholarship has not yet made space for the reflexive instructional voice. In this chapter, we attempt to surface latent tensions

involved in online learning that often go unnoticed or underarticulated in scholarly discussions about the complex art of e-learning and e-teaching.

The co-authors teach in a doctoral program in educational leadership at Appalachian State University (ASU), a comprehensive regional university in a rural, mountainous area of North Carolina, in the southeastern United States. In our doctoral program, most students have full-time jobs and study part-time. There are two student cohorts that meet on campus, while another cohort meets at an off-campus site approximately 100 km distant.

In the spring of 2009, the co-authors were each scheduled to teach a section of a course on educational leadership, with one section on-campus, the other, off-campus. Rather than teaching the two sections in isolation, we decided to blur course boundaries by constructing a shared syllabus and bringing the cohorts together for periodic interaction in cyberspace using a wiki and a synchronous virtual environment in which students could communicate and share documents.

Hybrid courses such as ours are becoming the preferred instructional context for many faculty in higher education (Coogan, 2009; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). These courses enable students to build relationships in class while extending dialogue outside the confines of class meetings. While promising, the challenge of blending learning environments is new to most faculty: "Understanding how best to integrate these two modes of learning is and will continue to be a significant challenge for educators" (Skill & Young, 2002, p. 24). Rather than discovering the "best of both worlds" through our hybrid course, we have encountered unruly questions and nagging uncertainties about our pedagogical work that cross between worlds.

In this chapter, we sketch the benefits, challenges, and paradoxes we faced as newcomers to hybrid teaching. Far from finished, these reflections arise from this momentary pause between semesters, not intended to fix or finalize our thinking/feeling about teaching in virtual space, but to share where we are now, in our brief journey as emerging cyberinstructors for professional doctoral students.

WARNING: TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AHEAD

Our leadership course was not designed for direct application to the practical challenges that college and school administrators face. We aimed to bring students into another space behind and underneath their "day to day" work as leaders. We hoped that our students would encounter the course as a space of transformative learning in which they could reflect on the unexamined assumptions and frameworks they use to navigate their work and thus develop more inclusive, sophisticated perspectives. Such critical reflection on taken-for-granted ways of making meaning is the heart of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000). Indeed, transformative learning is said to occur when learners experience a shift in ways of interpreting the world (Cercone, 2008) that leads to greater clarity and openness.

To induce transformative learning, we blended collective conversations about macro-level issues of globalization, diversity, and educational policy with personal reflection about students' past experiences. To turn their gaze inward and backward in time, we asked students to write a series of reflective essays about their early experiences of leadership, their guiding values, and their pathways to leadership. To open space outside linear discourse, students were invited to present some of their reflections as "non-traditional expressive acts" which might take the form of songs, poems, collages, or slide shows. These expressive acts themselves were sometimes computer-mediated (as powerpoint presentations, for example) but always took place in face-to-face class sessions.

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