

Chapter 2

Civic Deliberations in COVID–19 and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

With online pedagogy becoming mainstream during COVID, research on digital instruction grew dramatically, finding that online pedagogy was on par with face-to-face methods. Adding to this body of work this chapter assesses collaborations to provide meaningful student deliberations. Of particular importance was how students created dialogue and were academically reflective as they lived in geographically dispersed locations from Texas to California, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, and Wisconsin. Indeed, significant findings provided proof that over the course of sixteen plus years including during COVID students fostered a multiplicity of academic reflective deliberations. With the rapidly evolving educational landscape this chapter provides evidentiary proof that carefully designed online collaborations provide effective deliberative communities, an amenable design for any discipline.

INTRODUCTION

Research consistently finds that critical reflection is more effective than other, more expository instructional approaches, irrespective of face-to-face, hybrid to online modes of instruction (Ananga & Biney, 2017; Misra, 2021; Rossini et al., 2021; Megahed & Hassan, 2021). Research also finds that constructing critical reflection processes in online spaces offer several benefits for this evolutionary process (Burke & Larmar, 2021; Miller et al., 2021; Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021; Zeivots et al., 2021). Among these benefits are that online spaces are asynchronous which provide time to reflect, review concepts, respond and deliberate with others as one can respond any time after work and home obligations. This makes for greater convenience, ease of use and flexibility in participation as the content is more digestible. With asynchrony, learning happens at the learner's own pace allowing each student to view lectures, finish assignments, and take exams at any point before their deadlines. Additionally, students can kickstart in-course conversations at any point revisiting the deliberations.

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While another benefit for critical reflection online is that there is anonymity which empowers students to speak their minds freely expressing varied perspectives. In addition, they know that someone is always listening, engaging, and reacting based on what they wrote at any time of day so that they can ‘test the water’ with their knowledge before unreservedly sharing perspectives (Carroll & Ryan, 2005; East, 2019; Easton, 2003). Research also concludes that anonymity creates a ‘level playing field’ amongst students (Blake, 2000; Easton, 2003), widening participation from cohorts such as international students, students returning to education, first generation students and more join as they are eager to engage and practice their voice.

Engagement with peers develops social capital amongst them whom they turn to when first stuck on a problem, sympathizing with shared struggles and experiences rather than asking the instructor (Boud & Cohen, 2014). And while student peers do not always lead to obtaining accurate information, there are advantages to learning from people we know is that they are, or have been, in a similar position to ourselves. They have faced the same challenges as we have in the same context, they talk to us in our own language and we can ask them what may appear, in other situations, to be silly questions. Learning from each other is not only a feature of informal learning, but it also occurs in all courses at all levels. The support and the engagement processes coupled with the online spaces providing convenient, flexibility, anonymity and asynchrony provide the scaffolded support each need (Peeters, 2019), along with the motivation and interest to continuously engage in reflective discourse (Volkovskii, 2021).

With online learning environments proliferating our times and the abundance of research on online pedagogy this chapter explores online collaborations during COVID to evaluate how collaborations affect the ecology of and deliberative practices inherent in education, albeit online among students no matter their mode of instruction or geographic location.

BACKGROUND

John Dewey’s approach to education in 1933 was revolutionary for his time as he espoused that student learned through a ‘firsthand’ approach which involved developing their problem solving and reflective skills. While the educator became a facilitator encouraging students to think about what they are doing involving them in reflective practice (Dewey, 1933).

While Dewey’s concept was intended for face-to-face classes integrating critical reflection online was extended by Garrison’s Community of Inquiry Model (COL). The model proposed a Venn diagram of three overlapping “presences” – cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence to adapt the critical inquiry process to online pedagogy.

The COL Framework

According to the COL framework the teaching presence element was the “design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 5). To build the online teaching presence element Garrison espoused that the course design took on greater prominence therefore the design of the web site would need to be familiar to students such as Facebook so the focus would be on the course requirements. In addition, the course design would need to include activities such as locating and building curricular materials, sequencing lessons, and writing assignment guidelines and evaluation criteria.

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