A Classroom of One is a Community of Learners: Paradox, Artistic Pedagogical Technologies, and the Invitational Online Classroom

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Abstract

How can students in an online classroom of one, often sitting in solitude in front of a computer, experience community? The authors suggest that in part, the answer lies in creating invitational online educational spaces through the use of Artistic Pedagogical Technologies (ATPs), particularly Photovoice (PV) a teaching strategy. A Zen paradox (or Zen koan) discussion is undertaken utilizing Palmer's (2007) six paradoxes of pedagogical design as a framework for understanding how PV creates invitational classrooms through the presence of paradox.

Recently, convocation ceremonies were held at a large online university in Western Canada. For most in attendance it was the first time that students met face-to-face with their instructors and classmates. In her address, the valedictorian spoke of the challenges and benefits of attending an online university.

She noted that she completed her Master's degree in a classroom of one sitting in solitude in front of a computer screen course after course. Yet in her address she noted that she had experienced a sense of connection with fellow students and teachers during her classes. She noted that enhanced connectedness was made possible because of more intimate knowledge of other students' values, life priorities, and belief. The valedictorian described her experience as being part of a community of learners.

This valedictorian's seemingly paradoxical experience of being in a classroom of one, and yet sensing she was also part of a community of learners, is not always the norm for online students (Paxton, 2003). Online learners may feel isolated and alone and find the experiences of virtuality unreal and unsatisfying (Huang, 2002; Paxton, 2003; Splitter, 2009). Further, online learners may experience feelings of disconnect and a sense of being lost in cyberspace (Andone, Dron, Boyne & Pemberton, 2006; Paxton, 2003).

Developing online curricula that encourages social presence are key to enhancing teacher and student online relationships and reducing social isolation (Garrison, 2007). One approach to reducing social isolation is creating invitational classrooms that lead to participants experiencing the social presence of other students and the teacher (Paxton, 2003). The purpose of this paper is to explore how the use of APTs (Perry & Edwards, 2010), particularly PV a teaching strategy, assist in creating invitational online classrooms. The underpinnings of Invitational Theory and Practice (ITP) are reviewed and the characteristics of invitational classrooms are delineated (Purkey & Novak, 2008; Shaw & Siegel, 2010). An examination of the use of paradox in understanding PV spaces as invitational places/spaces is undertaken. Further, Palmer's (2007) six paradoxes of pedagogical design are applied as a framework to explore PV and broaden the understanding of invitation within the context of APT's.

Invitational Theory

Foundations

ITP is based on five elements of human interaction*, trust, respect, optimism, care,* and *intentionality* (Purkey & Novak, 2008; Shaw & Siegel, 2010). When all five elements are present in an educative environment, these elements serve to invite, nurture, and support learners in realizing successful outcomes (Riner, 2003). By accepting invitations to develop their abilities, learners are empowered to reach their highest potential and educative environments become cooperative and collaborative in nature (Riner, 2003). According to invitational theory, respect suggests that all humans possess ability, are valuable, and demonstrate responsibility (Steyn, 2006). Trust means that all education is bound within collaborative and cooperative activities, while optimism is the belief that humans possess unlimited latent and overt potential (Steyn, 2006). This potential is "realized [when] people, places, policies, processes and programs are

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[intentionally] designed to invite [that] development" (p. 21).

Characteristics of the Invitational Classroom

Considerable research has been done in the last two decades related to invitationalism and delineating the characteristics of invitational classrooms (Chant, Moes & Ross, 2009; Hunter & Smith, 2007; Paxton, 2003; Purkey, 1992; Steyn, 2006; Steyn, 2009; Usher & Pajares, 2006). Although invitational research has primarily focused on face-to-face classrooms, research in the context of the online classroom is beginning to emerge (Perry & Edwards, 2011; Perry, Menzies, Janzen & Edwards, in press). These studies demonstrate that invitational classrooms, both face-to-face and online, share many characteristics. While most of these characteristics are teacher-focused or teacher-generated, there are some common characteristics which are also student-generated.

The online classroom embodies invitational characteristics (see Table 1). However, there are additional constraints that are inherent in the e-classroom setting that may potentially make this environment less invitational. E-classrooms may have elements that are experienced by some learners as "dis-inviting" (Paxton, 2003, p. 26). Paxton (2003) found that some of the constraints of the e-classroom can be mediated through the application of ITP principles. Creating invitational classrooms in the online setting requires intentional and purposeful teacher-initiated strategies. Paxton (2003), as well as Hunter & Smith (2007) found that these can include giving consistent feedback developing online activities that invite creativity and being 'real' in online communications (Janzen, Perry & Edwards, 2011). Exclusive focus on online class content without including inviting learning strategies can result in a learning milieu students experience as unwelcoming and less engaging.

Table 1. Characteristics of Face to Face and On-line Invitational Classrooms.

Characteristics of Face-to-Face and On-line Invitational Classroom	Student-Focused Characteristics	Teacher-Focused Characteristics
Invitations are both student-generated and teacher-generated (Usher & Pajeres, 2006).	√	√
Amplify confidence in academia and enhance wellbeing (Usher & Pajeres, 2006)		√
Purposeful in creating milieus that invite "students to see themselves as able, valuable, and responsible" (Usher & Pajeres, 2006, p. 13).		√
Environments are safe and foster a sense of community (Hunter & Smith, 2007; Paxton, 2003). Freedom from judgement or ridicule (Hunter & Smith, 2007). Presence of a positive classroom culture (Steyn, 2006).		√
Presence of feedback that is both public and private (Paxton, 2003).		√
Involvement of peers as mentors and/or collaborators either formally or informally (Paxton, 2003).		√
Teachers communicate caring (Hunter & Smith, 2007).		√
Freedom for personal expression of opinions, uniqueness as an individual, and ideas; experimentation with ideas and resources in novel ways (Hunter & Smith, 2007).		√
Fosters imagination and creativity (Hunter & Smith, 2007).		√
Participants have sense of accountability (Paxton, 2003) Participants express a sense of personal ownership (Hunter & Smith, 2007).	√	√
Focus on holistic development of student (Hunter & Smith 2007).		√
Individual support is provided to student (Steyn, 2006)		√
Create and identify a shared vision and cooperative goals (Steyn, 2006).	√	√
Consistently cultivate expectations of excellence (Steyn, 2006).	√	√
Presence of teacher as role model (Steyn, 2006).		√

A dis-inviting online classroom may lead to student isolation, a lack of accountability due to the "faceless" nature of online classes, a belief that instructors do not delve into the student's "thinking processes," and a view that the e-learning environment is not "real" (Paxton, 2003, p. 26). Paxton

(2003) asserts that this leads to a sense of being disconnected which discourages an environment where students feel a connection to a community of learners. Invitational classrooms provide "solutions to [these] disinviting e-learning practices" with a focus on "fostering student

thinking skills, problem solving abilities, and social interaction" (p. 26). Invitational classrooms in this regard, help reduce student isolation, increase the sense of community and create opportunities for teachers to explore student cognitive processes in more depth (Paxton, 2003).

Paradoxes of Pedagogical Design

Understanding Paradox

Etymologically, the word paradox is drawn from the Greek word *paradoxos* where *para* means "contrary to" and *doxa* means "opinion" (Skeat. 1882, p. 420)). Further, paradox is attributed to the word *dokien* which is defined as "to appear, seem or think" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2011, para. 3). In Japanese, the word paradox is referred to as a Zen paradox or koan where *ko* means "public" and *an* is a "proposition" or question (Heine & Wright, 2000, 268). For centuries Zen Buddhist monks have utilized what is known as paradoxical discussions to "draw in... the intellect and [open] the way for something deeper to arise and be recognized... in a fuller context" (Rowan, 2010).

Paradoxes of Pedagogical Design

This same sense of koan or paradox can be applied to further understand invitational classrooms. Palmer (2007) identifies six paradoxes of pedagogical design which not only create fresh and engaging classrooms but also result in classrooms that are inviting to both students and teachers. A paradox, when thought of metaphorically, is like a magnet with two polarities existing on a continuum. The two ends of the magnet will never touch, yet they complement each other as the materials that make up the magnet are indivisible. The magnet could be thought of as the invitational classroom and the polarities of the magnet as the invitations that are provided to both students and teachers. Palmer (2007) speaks of this polarity or sense of paradox as being the "creative tension" (p. 77) that keeps face-to-face classrooms invitational. It is posited that this sense of paradox also applies to the online classroom.

According to Palmer (2007) face-to-face classrooms are paradoxical environments where polarity exists between the characteristics of those classrooms. In an invitational classroom or invitational space:

1. The space should be bounded and open.
2. The space should be hospitable and charged.
3. The space should invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group.

4. The space should honour the little stories of the students and the big stories of the discipline and tradition.
5. The space should support solitude and surround it with the resources of the community.
6. The space should welcome both silence and speech (Palmer, 2007, p. 76).

Artistic Pedagogical Technologies

APT's are online arts-based teaching strategies that use visual, literary, musical or dramatically based elements Perry & Edwards, 2010). Examples of APT's include PV, parallel poetry, conceptual quilting, wordl, online theatre, conceptual mosaics and virtual talking stick roundtables. The philosophical underpinnings of APTs are from Vygotsky's (1978) Social Development Theory (SDT). Perry et al., (2011) have explored ITP as a link to the successful application of APT teaching strategies. Through the constructs of ITP, APT's have the potential to assist educators in establishing online classrooms that are invitational. One APT teaching strategy, PV, has been particularly promising in this regard.

Photovoice

The use of photographic images as a tool for participatory action research was developed by Wang and Burris (1997) and adapted as an online teaching strategy by Perry and Edwards, (2010). When using PV as a teaching strategy, photographic images are paired with reflective questions in online courses to create invitations for students to engage creatively, socially, interactively and constructively in interactions regarding course content (Perry & Edwards, 2010). A selected digital image is purposefully posted to a dedicated online forum with an accompanying reflective question and learners are invited to respond to the image and the question. For example, a PV in a course that encourages self-assessment, a digital image of a forked pathway in a grassy mountain meadow is posted. One fork in the part is well travelled, the other side less visible. Additionally, one trail leads into the woods (the unknown), while the other leads into the light. The accompanying reflective question is, "Which path will you choose as you continue in your career?" (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Example of a Photovoice Image.

Note. Image by Otto F. Mahler, used by permission.

PV activities are invitational in nature in part because they are neither compulsory nor graded. The images and questions are presented to students and they are invited to choose to participate (or not). Student responses are shared in an online forum reserved for this activity on the course web-space. Students can choose to respond to the reflective question and image, as well as to postings from their classmates.

In order to further evaluate invitationalism in regard to APTs, the authors speculate that the presence of paradox, which according to Pamler (2009) is inherent in the invitational classroom) may also be a defining factor in the success of APTs in facilitating the creation of invitational online classrooms. This paper utilizes a simple koan based upon the construct of paradoxes which asks of the APT educative environment and more particularly of PV, "How is a classroom of one a community of learners?" Palmer's (2007) six paradoxes frame the answers to this Zen Koan.

Koans and the Paradox Discussion

The paradox discussion, when carried out between a Zen Master and a novice, becomes a "test of the novice's competence" which draws upon intuition rather than "analytic intellect" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2011, para. 1). PV activities encourage students to apply what they already know to their analysis of the image. Further students are encouraged to use not only intellect (in terms of course content) but also intuition as they reflect in creative ways on relationships among the images, the questions, and what they know. In this way PV becomes personally relevant and meaningful.

"Koans [as well as PV reflective questions] are not rational questions with [defined correct answers]. [Rather, koans] are especially designed for one purpose [which] is to open the mind which has been closed by habitual responses to the world and reality" (Demand Media, 2010, para 6). Zen koans are "about hearing the impossible" where the impossible "is only termed impossible within the framework of conventional reality" (para. 6). PV in essence takes the students into another realm of discovery where habitual responses give way to the sharing of what is possible instead of what is impossible. Through this experience students may form a sense of vision that they can take with them far beyond the confines of the virtual classroom.

Koan paradoxes "cannot be understood on a conceptual level. Koans exhaust the logical activity of the mind so that the mind will break out of its conventional view of the nature of reality" (Grenard, 2008, p. 153). Koans, when viewed in this sense, become a platform upon which students and teachers can begin to develop fundamental relationships and ideas through working together (Grenard, 2008). This working together involves a joint effort on the part of both student and teacher. As with koans, in PV activities the teacher provides the images and the questions and the students provide the answers. This reflects a cooperative stance where students are invited to not only share what they see within the image, but also are able to explore their own consciousness for a sense of personal meaning evoked by the image and question. Instructors become 'facilitators' and 'guides' as students explore PV activities.

A Classroom of One is a Community of Learners: Palmer's Paradoxes Revisited

The koan which guided this paper was posed in the question, "How is a classroom of one a community of learners?" Through Palmer's (2007) paradoxes a solution to this koan becomes more apparent. In the PV space, there exists a classroom of one. The classroom of one is bounded, honors the stories of individual students, is positively charged,

supports solitude, welcomes silence, and reflects the voice of the individual. Within the PV space there also endures a community of learners where the learning space honors the stories and tradition of the discipline, is hospitable, surrounds students with the resources of the community, welcomes speech, reflects the voice of the group, and is open. Both of these polarities exist simultaneously in PV learning activities.

Each of Palmer's (2009) six paradoxes are described in more detail as they pertain to the invitational classroom and PV.

1.   The space should be bounded and open. Invitational classrooms (just as any other classroom) out of necessity have bounds or parameters in which they operate. Otherwise the classroom would exist on the edge of chaos and be directionless (Palmer, 2007). PV spaces are seen as purposeful in nature or in other words exist as intentional spaces which have bounds and limits (Usher & Pajeres, 2006). These limits are created and identified as the result of a shared vision and cooperative goals (Steyn, 2006). PV spaces become intentional and this intentionality creates specific bounds. Part of these bounds include crafting student outcomes of reflection and providing opportunities for students to become real Janzen et al., 2011 ,). Students also experience enhanced social presence where PV spaces additionally stimulate creativity, solidify course concepts, amplify personal applicability of course concepts and encourage expressiveness through the use of PV (Janzen et al., 2011).

Palmer (2007) notes the invitational classroom is one in which teachers and students are taking a journey together, where the direction is predetermined and yet the outcomes at the onset of the journey are not prescribed. There is a balance of boundaries and openness. More specifically, "if boundaries remind [students and teachers] that [their] journey has a destination, openness reminds [them] that there are many ways to reach that end" (p. 77). The PV classroom is envisioned as experimental in nature where personal expression guides and transforms ideas and resources in novel ways (Hunter & Smith, 2007). In these ways the PV classroom experience encompasses both freedom and constraint and thus is both bounded and open.

2. The space should be hospitable and charged. The invitational classroom must cultivate a sense of safety, trust, and freedom while at the same time, provide enough challenge (charge) that learners remain engaged (Hunter & Smith, 2007). In PV classrooms this is achieved partially through creating safe environments, fostering a sense of community (Hunter & Smith, 2007), and ensuring the presence of a positive classroom culture (Steyn, 2006). While the invitational classroom also becomes hospitable in these

ways, the invitational classroom remains charged though principles of accountability (Paxton, 2003) where demand for a sense of personal ownership (Hunter & Smith, 2007) is communicated through consistent expectation of excellence (Steyn, 2006).

Parameters of the charged classroom are evident in the PV space. A sense of personal ownership is evoked as PV activities continue to be offered over the duration of the course and students increasingly risk sharing their thoughts and feelings related to the images and questions. Students often see their own experiences reflected in PV images and begin to 'own' the images by relating what they see in the picture to their own lives. For example, an image of a lighthouse used as a PV image in a leadership course may evoke not only a discussion of qualities of outstanding leaders, but it may also encourage students to share their stories of the love of the sea or vacations to the coast. Through this ownership of the images—elements of the person become revealed to classmates and teachers.

While there is not an implicit expectation of excellence regarding PV, excellence is evident from the depth of insight and level of critical thinking expressed in PV responses (Perry & Edwards, 2010). Learners hold themselves and others accountable for their PV responses by engaging in discussion and further questioning regarding what is shared. It is common for a fellow student to ask a poignant question that causes as student to further explain a PV posting.

While invitational classrooms are also believed to promote accountability (Paxton, 2003) this feature is not apparent with the PV activity given that participation is not compulsory or graded. Accountability is limited to the student's sense of being real or authentic in this environment. This may have implications in creating online classrooms where students choose to be present rather than being dictated to be present. An ongoing invitation for participation exists however which may reach the student who is undecided regarding their participation. The invitation is always open for students to join the PV activity in progress. In this way the very act of continual invitation becomes a grounding construct that is embedded in PV activities.

3. The space should invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group. Palmer (2007) notes that learning is supported when students are invited to find not only their voices, but their "authentic voices" (p. 78). This is achieved in PV because there is freedom for personal expression of opinions and ideas which reflect the unique nature of each learner's perspective (Hunter & Smith, 2007). PV encourages authentic communication and supports authentic voice (Janzen et al., 2011). Individuals are free to express their responses to the image without evaluation as no

response is right or wrong. This openness encourages the finding of personal voice.

Usher and Pajeres (2006) note that invitations in the invitational class are both teacher-generated and student-generated. PV is an invitation that results in the sharing of individual voices—the first step in finding the collective voice of the class. Further, the finding of the collective voice is facilitated because both students (and sometimes teachers) respond to one another's PV postings with affirming comments and further questions. Such responses potentially make participants feel "valued, able, [and] responsible" (p. 8). These exchanges help create a positive climate where diversity is valued yet participants realize that there are commonalities embedded in this diversity. The shared commonalities can be a catalyst for a common vision for the course.

In courses where PV invitations are both student and teacher-generated, the voice of the group is valued equally with the voice of the individual (Usher & Pajeres, 2006). The voice of the collective group often emerges in addition to the voices of individual students as collective insights are shared. In PV activities, invitations to participate are provided with the posting of the image and reflective questions by the instructor. Invitations to respond to other students' postings in turn provide another level of invitation. These invitations come from the students themselves as they often conclude their PV posting with something like "does anyone agree" or "what do you see" or "what are other people thinking?" In the PV space the discussion is often substantial as messages are continually being sent and received.

The students accept each other for who they are and for being inherently human. If invitations are understood as "messages sent" and social persuasion is understood as "messages received," then the "invitations that [the] students [send] themselves [are ultimately] influenced by the social persuasions they received from others" in terms of "competence and capability" (p.8).

As the truths of the group and the truths of the individual emerge (Palmer, 2007) in the PV space, these truths find a space/place where these truths begin to exist simultaneously. Instructors operate in the capacity of giving voice to the group through the posting of images and reflective questions where various "thought patterns emerge" (p. 83). The result then is represented as "an emergent collective wisdom" where the group acts in various roles including affirmers, questioners, and challengers (p. 79).

4. The space should honor the "little" stories of the individual and the "big stories" of the discipline and tradition. Palmer (2007) considers inviting students to tell "the tale of their lives" as the sharing of "little stories" (p.

79). In the PV activity students are encouraged to share their little life stories without judgement or ridicule (Hunter & Smith, 2007). Beyond sharing personal stories, the telling of individual stories of the respondent's respective discipline and tradition has an impact upon the learning environment. When this occurs, the scope of the story becomes much larger and archetypes provide depth and breadth of understanding (Palmer, 2007). In a holistic sense, the stories of the discipline represent the collective wholes upon which the stories of the individual student (as parts of that whole) are both compared and contrasted. This facilitates holistic development of students (Hunter & Smith, 2007) who respect and honor traditions that have emerged from the discipline. Palmer (2007) notes that this sense of development avoids the pitfalls of narcissism. In this process caring educational communities may be created (Hunter & Smith, 2007).

5. The space should support solitude and surround it with the resources of the community. The PV space provides a milieu where learners had both time and space for solitude. Palmer (2007) identifies that this solitude allows students to discover their inner selves. Additionally, Palmer (2007) suggests that when learners are also surrounded with the resources of the community there is a "dialogical exchange" which is fundamental to self-growth (p. 79). When this sense of solitude is "nourished and protected by a teacher" (p. 80) the very presence of the teacher acts as a role model (Steyn, 2006). This is very evident even though the presence of the instructor in the PV activities is in the background as the instructor posts the image and questions. Students are very aware of the instructors' presence knowing they are reading their posts and providing an ongoing contribution through additional weekly images and questions. The students find the instructors' presence (noted by the ongoing posting of images and questions) one of the most meaningful features of PV reported by students (Perry, Menzies, Janzen & Edwards, in press). Through this modelling, "sensibilities and safeguards" (Palmer, 2007, p. 80) are created which provide individual support for learners (Steyn, 2006).

When teachers give feedback that is both private and public this sense of honouring the spaces of solitude as well as community, is nurtured (Paxton, 2003). Teachers facilitate rather than dictate in such learning environments (Palmer, 2007). Being a facilitator is one of the chief instructor roles that students identify that is important to them (Author et al., in press). The resources of the community are also found when peers involve each other as collaborators in both formal and informal ways (Paxton, 2003). This provides an atmosphere where students learn to be confident in their own truths. Further, this atmosphere fosters a sense of wellbeing

in those who mentor and those who are mentored within the PV environment (Usher & Pajeres, 2006).

6. The space should welcome both silence and speech. Optimally participants have the choice to speak or be silent. In most online courses, speaking becomes a written posting and silence is the absence of written postings. Since PV activities are optional, students have the choice of speaking or remaining silent. Being silent in an online course (evidenced by the lack of a written post) does not necessarily equate to students not being engaged. Rather invited silence can result in reflection. In this silence students may take the opportunity to reflect deeply on PV images and questions as they are provided with the necessary time in which to experiment with ideas and resources in novel ways (Hunter & Smith, 2007). This silence and opportunity for reflection may allow meanings to emerge that might not be realized in any other way.

Students engaged in PV online may choose to "speak" by sharing their perspectives in online posts. Hunter and Smith (2007) note that speech in the invitational classroom should become an expression of imagination and creativity. PV is a catalyst for this element of speech as responses draw upon students' artistic and creative abilities. Further, when these creative responses are shared, the understandings of the collective group are enhanced and a sense of safety with the community is fostered (Usher & Pajeres, 2006).

Conclusion

The foundations of ITP were explored with a delineation of characteristics of the invitational classroom which focuses on trust, respect, optimism, care, and intentionality. The construct of paradox was elucidated through the use of etymology. An overarching question was posed to structure the paper in the form of a Zen Koan. Palmer's (2007) six paradoxes of pedagogical design were applied as a framework to discuss the invitational nature of PV spaces in the context of APT's.

In continuing with the tradition of Zen Buddhist monks, who asked paradoxical questions to elicit intuition and wisdom, a Zen paradox discussion was undertaken to further explicate the answer to the question, How is a classroom of one also a community of learners? The outcome of this discussion leads one to understand that a classroom of one, when viewed in terms of ITP and paradox, can also be a community of learners. The PV space can allow both polarities to exist simultaneously which are felt to enhance the online classroom experience for students.

As Garrison (2007) suggests, developing online curricula that encourage social presence helps to reduce the social isolation that often exists in the online classroom. Developing teaching strategies such as PV which encourage social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Perry & Edwards, 2010) also assist in making online classrooms invitational. In PV spaces, the presence of all six paradoxes of pedagogical design (Palmer, 2007) contribute to the invitational nature of the PV environment. This environment ultimately fulfills the five requirements of invitational classrooms: trust, respect, optimism, care, and, intentionality, and provides a possible solution to some constraints of the e-classroom.

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