

“Letting go of the reins:” The Evolution of Pedagogy in an Online Graduate Program

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While many online graduate level courses mirror traditional face-to-face didactic teaching (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000), some programs are taking advantage of the rich opportunities for interaction online to create courses that embody social constructivist approaches. These emphasize the importance of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1994) and of students’ engaging actively with each other, with experts, and with the material to construct their own understanding (Gergen, 1995; Wilson, 1993). This paper explores the evolution of one professor’s pedagogy over the course of a year’s teaching in an online master’s program grounded in these approaches. The study uses two different methods—interview and analysis of newsgroup threads.

The professor we studied, ‘Pat’, is an experienced teacher who has taught in higher education for a decade, as well as in both middle and high schools. Having taught online at another university, she had joined this program because of her interest in pursuing online teaching in more depth in an institution with impressive leadership that ‘wanted to grow.’ The 13-month program in which Pat teaches includes three face-to-face meetings of students and professors. The remainder of the program is online, and includes synchronous class meetings as well as other online tools-- newsgroups, web pages, groupware, chat shells, email.

METHODS

We interviewed Pat after she completed her first year in the online program. The 40-minute unstructured phone interview was analyzed for consistent themes that emerged with respect to Pat’s experience. In addition, we analyzed newsgroup threads from two of Pat’s classes (three sections in all), one in the fall and one in the spring.

THE TEACHER’S REPORT: WHAT THE INTERVIEW TELLS US

Four themes emerged as central—being herself, responding to the group: letting go of the reins, valuing community, and getting support.. The first theme emphasized the challenges for Pat of figuring out how to ‘be herself’ online and get ‘some of the things that work for me face-to-face to work in that synchronous environment.’ She uses several strategies to bring her own culture and personality to the online environment, but still sees this as a challenge.

Regarding the second theme, Pat is very clear about having made a significant change in her teaching—giving more control to the group. “..I had to learn to be more responsive to the group and their questions, not just posting question after question, but allowing some of the discussion to arise from their interest with it. So really letting go of the reins more.”

The third theme focuses on the community that this program helps students develop, in part because each cohort of 20 goes through the program together. She emphasizes the close bonds the students develop, because they communicate about and help each other with many different things. “ So ...what they get is a ...network even beyond what a lot of faculty have in that they have a group of peers that they can contact in lots of different scenarios again and again...”

Finally, Pat talks about how important the program leaders have been in enabling her to develop as a teacher. For example, the program director “doesn’t get in your way on anything. She’s sort of waiting to see what you want to do, but she’s also there to support you...”

CHANGES OVER TIME: WHAT THE NEWSGROUPS TELL US

The messages in each newsgroup were coded by who initiated them (teacher or student) and by content categories (e.g., Logistics, Assignment). In the fall, the course newsgroup contained 537 postings covering 85 subject headings, with slightly more than half of the topics put into play by the teacher. Logistics is the most frequent category, with postings that explain the syllabus, the schedule of online chat sessions, and the assignments, as well as the use of small groups and pairs to do course work. The balance of the initiated discussion is focused on Assignments and Resources, not on Discussion, to which only 7 of the 85 threads are devoted. Apparently, students are busy completing and turning in assignments, without much opportunity for construction of knowledge through dialogue in threaded newsgroups. This function must take place in the synchronous ‘chat’ sessions, which occur less than once a week. Although few threads are coded as Reading Question, this category reflects a traditional college course approach, which begins with the professor asking a question about the readings.

In the second semester, Pat relinquishes dominance of the topics in the threaded discussion. Down from 51.8%, the percent of topics initiated by the teacher is 37.3% and 38.5% in each section, respectively. Similarly, she ceases to ask Reading Questions. Furthermore, there is a general shift away from Logistics onto Discussion Topics. This reflects a shift in how students participate. Instead of formal assignments and reading questions, Pat now asks students to lead fellow students, to formulate an initial prompt for discussion in newsgroup and /or online. This request fulfills the same function as previous formal questions and reading assignments—getting students to think about the material. Now, however, the postings are largely student initiated (71% and 58.1%) extensions of course topics.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In becoming an online teacher in this master's program, the professor learned a great deal and changed her pedagogy. 'Letting go of the reins' required that she give up some old strategies—e.g., posting questions to structure the online discussion—as well as adopt some new ones—e.g., giving students the responsibility for structuring a reading discussion. Her comments suggest that she saw this change as being responsive to students and as creating more meaningful learning opportunities for them..

While it is remarkable that such a visible shift took place in less than one year, many factors were supportive of this change. First, Pat herself wanted to learn how to continue to teach well in this new environment. Moreover, she came to the program with considerable experience in teaching and comfort with technology. Second, the structure and philosophy of the program, as well as its leadership, was supportive of her taking risks and developing. And, finally, the technology made a significant contribution. It provided feedback about the effectiveness of her teaching and about the engagement of her students. She 'listened' to what the students were saying to her online.

This case suggests how we might investigate teachers' development on line more broadly. It underscores the value of using more than one method. Using both, the results indicated clearly that Pat had indeed given over more control to the students. The newsgroup analyses showed explicitly the changes that occurred in who initiated conversations and in what they were about. The interview indicated that this was a change that Pat herself was aware of and considered important.

Learning to teach in an online environment is complex and challenging. It offers possibilities that face-to-face teaching does not, while removing the visual and auditory immediacy of the face-to-face classroom. Making or constructing one's way as a teacher in this new space is likely to be a developmental process that takes place over many years. As teachers gain confidence, take risks, experiment with the technology and the pedagogy, and see themselves as part of a community in which practice itself is evolving, we will observe developments that we may not now be able to predict, let alone imagine.

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