

Original Paper

Subtle Multicultural Advantages of Online Learning: A Focus on Perspective-Taking

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Abstract

Many teachers have been challenged by the unexpected and rushed transition to online learning, forcing them to modify their courses for a virtual environment in a matter of weeks, or even days. Hopefully, they will soon see pedagogical advantages of virtual learning that may be overlooked during this unprecedented time—in addition to the current benefit of protecting the health of faculty, staff, and students. Four that are presented here are particularly relevant to teachers of culturally diverse students who increasingly enroll in online courses: (1) cycles of reflection, (2) scaffolded integration of content, (3) articulate communication, and (4) visible responsibility for learning. The advantages to both deep learning and perspective-taking—both of particular interest to culturally diverse student populations—are presented for each of the four benefits.

Keywords

virtual learning, deep learning, perspective-taking, reflection, communication, integration, student responsibility

1. Introduction

Increasingly, both learners and teachers have turned to online learning to supplement traditional teaching environments. If you ask why, many cite practical reasons, such as 24/7 access to a course, availability of educational resources, consistency in responsiveness to all learners, and ease in record-keeping and assessment of assignments and grades. It helps to access one online template for all learner dialogues and assignments, along with posting of teacher/learner interactions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the transition to online learning modes. Most U.S. colleges and universities fully transitioned to virtual learning in March 2020. In October 1, 2020, 44% of

colleges were still at least primarily virtual (10% were fully online; 34% were primarily online), and another 21% were hybrid (Elias et al., 2020). Visual tools such as Zoom or SKYPE bridge the difference in ways not conceived of when online learning first evolved (Palupi & Raharjo, 2020).

How might teachers envision using online environments over time? Are adjustments to distance education beneficial to learning as well as to pragmatics? This is not the first discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of online learning (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015, Daymont, Blau, & Campbell, 2011, Dumford & Miller, 2018, James, 2002). The reflections presented here come from seasoned personal experience (Shaw & Chen, 2012, Shaw, 2011, Shaw & Chacon, 2010). Managing an online program in Human Development, overseeing development of 26 courses, and teaching diverse courses in the behavioral sciences have led to an appreciation that online learning augments deep learning while enabling students to assimilate diverse perspectives, a key element of multicultural education (Gay, 1995). Four specific advantages of online learning lead to increased cultural awareness in the social/behavioral sciences. They are: (1) critical and empathic *reflection* with others, (2) *integration* of new ideas with prior personal experience, (3) effective *communication* of one's perspective in light of perspectives of others, and (4) personal *responsibility* for learning for oneself and for classmates. The value of face-to-face learning, with its direct spontaneity and sparks of insight, can never be replaced, but added to that might be a recognition that online learning had advantages, too.

2. Reflection

2.1 Deep Learning

The very aspects of online learning that differ most from face-to-face instruction—separation of the student in time and space from the instructor and class—can increase both critical and empathic reflection. Reflection “is used to pull together a broad range of previous thinking or knowledge to make greater sense of it for another purpose” (Moon, 2015, p. 5). Critical reflection requires serious analysis of prior viewpoints within new intellectual frameworks. Empathic reflection requires openness to giving value to life experience of others. Neither critical nor empathic reflection is achieved alone. Indeed, Mezirow's (1998) theory of transformative learning clarifies “perspective transformation” as having a psychological dimension (changes to self-understanding), convictional (revision to one's belief systems), and behavioral (lifestyle changes). Extended online opportunities to write one's thoughts for personal and group reflection, to respond to written feedback from both the instructor and the class (depending on the assignment), and to carefully cite references (clearly distinguishing one's own ideas from those of others) all contribute to deeper articulation of one's perspectives, leading to greater individuation of oneself within the context of individual others (Dewey, 1986). The role of instructor, rather than being diminished, is heightened by opportunities to closely respond to unique paths of each student's reasoning. Thoughts that would otherwise be internal are made manifest and

perhaps reflected on through online exchanges, thus deepening and enlarging perspectives while promoting intellectual growth and social awareness.

2.2 Perspective-Taking

Collaborating with classmates in critical online reflection allows students a safe space to consider and explore perspectives other than their own. Exposure to diverse perspectives often creates a tension in the student's belief system, resulting in culture shock. That tension offers a critical and healthy critique of existing beliefs. Through this process, students may vicariously experience other worldviews, even if in disagreement (Thein et al., 2007). Beyond that, students may more comfortably "try on" alternative perspectives, perhaps even reconsidering their own. In online asynchronous discussions, students allow others a glimpse of their personal perspectives and, in turn, are exposed to worldviews of classmates. Time before posting and before responding provides opportunity to consider and reconsider—to reflect on—exchanges. Students may engage in a deeper understanding of not only the subject matter but also diverse perspectives that color its interpretation. To extrapolate on work done by Park and Choi on online retention of adult learners, reflection can augment relevance; relevance enhances satisfaction; and satisfaction increases persistence/retention (Park & Choi, 2009). Reflection is a signpost for effective learning, no matter what the mode.

3. Integration

3.1 Deep Learning

Erikson (1994/1959) was right: The desire to integrate different aspects of our lives is strong and increases as we age. We build knowledge by integrating new experiences into existing ones (Schlichting & Preston, 2015). "This memory integration process is suggested to happen through reactivation of old information while learning new information and can help build a consistent knowledge network . . . that in turn serves future learning" (van Kesteren et al., 2018). The thoughtful nature of online exchanges, where one's words are reviewed again and again, frequently leads to a new network across formerly disparate concepts. Students learn from themselves by reviewing their early work in the light of later entries. Self-reflection encourages Mezirow's (1998) changes to sense of self (psychological), to beliefs (convictional), and even possibly to life choices (behavioral). Students sometimes surprise themselves with their new outlooks: That realization is itself a recognition of their greater openness to diversity.

3.2 Perspective-Taking

As students *cognitively* integrate new information with past knowledge, they also *empathically* integrate diverse perspectives into their own understanding. In online learning environments, students view complex thoughts of their classmates. In authentic discussion environments, students openly express their individual perspectives "in a way that leads to new understandings and co-constructed forms of knowledge" (Hadjoannou, 2007, cited in McDougall, 2015, p. 95). In discussions, students co-construct their understanding of the course content with each other, gaining a deeper understanding

of both the subject and the perspectives of others (McDougall, 2015). While integrating new ideas with prior knowledge, students naturally integrate diverse *perspectives* with their own prior understanding of the world.

4. Communication

4.1 Deep Learning

Online courses offer opportunities in our current world to experience advantages that journaling and letter-writing afforded to reflective souls in earlier ages—but with responses potentially as fast as instant messages. Students engage more deeply with exchanges of insights offered through visuals, videos, voice, and even PowerPoints. These media plus the discipline of the academic framework potentially bring clear statements of world issues and articulated possibilities for their solutions to our fingertips. These vehicles for learning deepen class discussion with work more polished than what a student can yet produce, while honing their online research skills (Conrad & Johnson, 2004).

4.2 Perspective-Taking

Online learning environments enable further revision of one's thoughts after exposure to the written observations of classmates. When students see how classmates perceive the same knowledge (McDougall, 2015; Moon, 2015), they must reexamine their own perspectives (Thein et al., 2007), responding after critical reflection. Through a cyclical process of (1) detailed observation, (2) exposure to other views, (3) reflection and reexamination, and (4) revised observation, students revise their contributions, resulting in evolution of knowledge. Weigel (2002) observes online learning opportunities for “weaving student contributions into coherent observations or conclusions. The weaving process not only helps students integrate course material and see the big picture but also emphasizes their important role as knowledge creators” (p. 107).

5. Responsibility

5.1 Deep Learning

“Students must themselves become responsible for their own learning” (Tinto, 1987, p. 181). In online environments, learners typically post to all discussions and assignments. They are “called on” for all aspects of the class. Learners may create their own discussion topics, model their own assignments, and even negotiate to revise the direction or level of expectations, but once these commitments are made, their responses to shared expectations are visible to all. This is useful for both responsible learners who assure themselves that they have met expectations, and also for learning-to-be-responsible learners who get natural feedback on ways to improve, moving all students toward intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning.

Furthermore, students are co-responsible for the learning of others, as online environments encourage students to co-construct knowledge (McDougall, 2015). They must generate constructive ideas in online discussions, as well as augment the contributions of others (Beth et al., 2015). The very

experience of being responsible for one's learning encourages an interaction with subject matter on a deeper level. Co-responsibility is also encouraged through virtual online teams (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). Virtual teams facilitate peer-review, providing critique, reflections, and possible extensions of ideas, enabling students to hone their ideas in small work groups before presenting them to the class.

5.2 Perspective-Taking

In fulfilling their roles in online learning environments, students exchange multiple perspectives, interacting authentically with the subject matter, their teacher, and classmates. The ideas of others must be acknowledged and analyzed. Even initial acts of exchange may create an inner tension that leads students to critically reflect on their own beliefs (Thein et al., 2007). Through these types of interactions, "students experience changes that are often subtle . . . that increase their understandings of how their beliefs and values are formed and why other people think differently" (Thein et al., 2007, p. 55).

6. Conclusion

For teachers inexperienced in online instruction, the phrase *online learning* can elicit exasperated groans or annoyed eye rolls. In March 2020, most teachers were forced to convert face-to-face courses to courses in a virtual learning environment with little notice, and often little support. This article helps to make the case that it is possible to go through that transition and not only survive, but also thrive. Despite the drastic circumstances initiating this current transition, both teachers and students may come to appreciate online learning for its benefits, both practical and pedagogical. Students, particularly adult learners, have many impediments to carrying out responsibilities for continued learning (Park & Choi, 2009). The asynchronous and online environment has been shown to ameliorate some of these issues through flexibility in when one attends to course materials, and where one is physically located. These advantages drew students (and teachers) to online learning, even before the pandemic.

There is no upper age limit in online learning, and much generative mentoring occurs between learners with experiences to share (both younger and older) and online "listeners". Online learning provides andragogical advantages for adult learners whose prior life experiences often highlight the reflective, integrative, communicative, and responsible aspects of learning (Merriam et al., 2007; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Indeed, a plus of learning online is that one's physical self becomes secondary to one's learning goals and contributions. Because all students are required to participate in discussions, the words of shy, introverted, or self-conscious students have equal weight with dominant voices, giving them confidence in expressing their opinions. The online learning environment can be a petri dish for empathy and understanding of others at different life stages, within different family constellations, having different social and political attitudes, and with different cultural backgrounds and perspectives. In-person learning will always be preferred. So much of education is about modeling, social connection, and the energy of bonding in the moment. Through extended time teaching online, however, I have learned that distance education, too, has a role. Being aware of the advantages of both modes can make

learning deeper and stronger. The condition of distance can enable reflection, integration, communication, and responsibility – all salient aspects of successful multicultural experiences.

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