



FEEDBACK PLEASE: STUDYING SELF IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

Derek Anderson

Asst. Prof., Northern Michigan University, USA
dereande@nmu.edu

Sandra Imdieke

Prof. Northern Michigan University, USA
simdieke@nmu.edu

N. Suzanne Standerford

Prof. Northern Michigan University, USA
nstander@nmu.edu

This paper portrays a year-long self-study of three teacher educators who examined the extent to which online teaching is fundamentally different from teaching face-to-face. Using multiple data sources, including meeting notes, journals, syllabi, course materials, student work, and student evaluations, the authors found that student-to-instructor feedback in online courses presents unique challenges to teaching, particularly as related to instructor ego and desire of confirmation of efficacy. With some success, the authors employed new methods to address those challenges and improve their online teaching.

Key Words: online teaching, self-study, teacher education

INTRODUCTION

Online teaching is here to stay. Nearly half of today's college freshmen will take at least one online course, and nearly every university in the United States offers online courses (eduventures.com). While schools of education have been slow to offer undergraduate teacher certification online, online graduate courses have become ubiquitous. The benefits of online education are numerous, ranging from less threatening environments for culturally and physically diverse students to overcoming geographic boundaries. Recently, the U.S. Department of Education (2009) conducted an extensive meta-analysis of over 1,000 studies on online learning. After screening the studies down to 51 that met their criteria, they concluded that students in online courses outperformed students in traditional face-to-face formats.

The convenience of completing coursework on one's computer at a convenient time without having to commute to a campus has shifted the demand from traditional face-to-face graduate courses to those that are conducted online. To meet that demand, schools of education have increased their supply of online course offerings. The role of market economics in higher education is undeniable.

As with most transformational change events, the shift to online courses in education has not been without struggles. One of the primary challenges of this transition involves the willingness and capacity of the teacher to deliver instruction in this new format. At the core of this struggle lies the disconnect between the ways most instructors were taught and were taught to teach and the ways they are expected to teach online (Ham and Davey, 2006). In his seminal book, *School Teacher*, Lortie (1975) suggested the "apprenticeship of observation" has an anchoring effect on learning to teach, as teachers tend to teach the way they were taught. Perhaps for the first time in centuries, however, instructors now have to teach in ways vastly different from how they were taught and how they were taught to teach.

This paper portrays a year-long self-study of three teacher educators who examined their individual and collective practice of teaching online. Throughout the past year, we shared our course syllabi, assignments, and student work, wrote and shared journal entries, met bimonthly as critical friends, and revised and reanalysed the ways we teach online. Our study was precipitated by countless informal conversations about our online teaching and served to satisfy much more than our own curiosities. Our department's lack of guidelines or expectations for online courses, challenges from resistant colleagues about the integrity of online courses, and pressure from administration to maintain enrolment prompted us to apply a self-study methodology to examine our online teaching more systematically and critically.

Context

The three of us are colleagues at a regional state university located in the Upper Midwest of the United States. We each teach both undergraduate and graduate courses in teacher education with the majority of workload consisting of graduate courses. Our university services a large geographic area and has felt increased pressure to offer online courses from students and administration alike who recognize increased competition from other institutions that offer online courses. For one hundred years, and until less than a decade ago, our institution serviced a radius of teachers whose only options were to take mail-based correspondence courses, move closer to another university, or commute to our university for courses offered at night, on weekends, or during the

summer. Until recently, we had a captive audience. Now, the pressure to offer more courses online is incontestable.

We represent a range of experience as students and as teacher educators. Derek, an Assistant Professor and the least experienced and youngest of our group, is not quite a “digital native” but has taken a few hybrid and online courses during his graduate coursework. Suzanne and Sandy, Professors, have been teaching online for over five years though they have limited experience as students in online courses, having each taken one course online specifically to enhance their understanding of the online learning environment from the students’ perspective. It is clear that our experiences and perspectives on online learning impact our actions and intentions (Ham and Davey, 2006).

As “early adopters” relative to our department colleagues, we sought to study the extent to which our online teaching is different from our more practiced face-to-face teaching. Recognizing that online teaching can be every bit as effective as FTF (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), we wanted to examine the integrity and rigor of our online courses with the intent of improving our practice. Whitehead (2004, p. 872) suggested that at its core, self-study stems from the query, “How do I improve what I am doing?” Here, we wanted to extend beyond the andragogical and cognitive components of our online teaching to explore the emotional and psychological aspects of our online teaching.

METHOD

This paper stems from a larger self-study on our online teaching in general. We began by sharing with each other what we did in our online courses, including our syllabi, learning modules, assignments, online discussion transcripts, and student evaluations. We also recorded in detail for one week how we spent our time “teaching” our online courses. To search for themes, we used a general coding process, searching for recurring regularities or emergent patterns (Guba, 1978). We tested the emergent themes recursively, repeatedly challenging and analysing the centrality of our findings. Finally, we used confirming and disconfirming evidence from multiple sources to articulate our claims. One theme to emerge from this analysis was the role of feedback and teacher ego.

Once we had identified our theme and began to understand the literature, we experimented by trying new processes in our online courses. Throughout the next two semesters, we continued to meet semi-monthly to share our course materials and experiences and to discuss specifically the role of feedback in our online teaching. During these meetings, we used self-study methods to challenge each other through open, broad, and critical analysis (Loughran and

Northfield, 1998). In addition to documenting our conversations at each meeting, following each meeting we wrote reflective journal entries and shared those with each other via e-mail.

In order to better understand the ways feedback played a role in our online teaching throughout one semester as we became more aware of the phenomenon, we examined and coded the transcripts of our meetings, our journal entries, our numerous e-mail messages, and our course materials. Once again, we applied a general open and iterative coding process to test our themes. This triangulation enhanced the validity of our self-study since we used multiple sources of data collection, collected at different times, and interpreted by three colleagues (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2009). After more than twelve months of applying the uncomfortably challenging process of open and critical review (Schuck and Segal, 2002) through regular meetings, reflections, interpretations, and analyses, we uncovered what we had originally sensed but could not articulate. Self-study provided us the perfect method to “provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm or settle” (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20). Ultimately, we sought to answer the question: *What is the role of student-to-instructor feedback in the online classroom?*

FINDINGS

After more than twelve months of regular meetings, reflection, analysis, and critical examination, we came to understand the role of our egos and how their relations to feedback from our students in online courses were substantially different from our FTF teaching. Our self-study process was somewhat circuitous and covered a wide range of topics and questions, yet this theme prevailed and was evident in our discussions and reflections right from the beginning. We could now identify what we were previously only sensing in our teaching experiences: the differences in how we were receiving feedback from our students in online courses and the importance of that feedback.

To help us frame this fundamental difference between our FTF and online teaching, we drew on literature from several disciplines. Interestingly, we found little information on our theme in the literature on online teaching. To help us frame our understanding of feedback-seeking behaviour and the role of ego, we drew on literature from several disciplines outside of the field of education. In self-study we seek to examine our teaching through the lenses of our prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences with a goal of discovering alternative points of view from others (Samaras et al., 2004). In this self-study, we added additional lenses of organizational behaviour and social psychology through

which to study the differing role and format of feedback-seeking behaviour in our online classrooms.

Connecting Findings to Research on Feedback

Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. The premise is simple, but its implications are not. It will take time to unfold what I do and do not mean by those words. But here is one way to put it: in every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students, and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood – and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning (Palmer, 1998, p. 10)

Underpinning our teaching in general and our self-study specifically is our desire to teach well. We take pride in our craft. For us, like most teachers, teaching isn't merely our job, it is a significant part of who we are as individuals, and our egos are directly related to our persona as teachers. Feelings of personal accomplishment are vital to teachers' motivations (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

The reasons teachers are motivated to take intentional actions are varied and expand beyond the commonly-held dichotomy of intrinsic vs. extrinsic. Self-determination theory (SDT) suggests a continuum of motivations with intrinsic motivation as the most autonomous “characterized by enthusiasm, spontaneity, excitement, intense concentration, and joy” (Roth et al., 2007, p. 762). At the core of autonomous motivations for teaching are the realization of one's authentic self and personal accomplishment (Huberman, 1993). Bandura (1994) suggested that people with a high perceived self-efficacy approach difficult tasks, such as teaching, as challenges rather than threats. In short, good teachers teach because it's what they love to do and because they derive value and a sense of accomplishment from the act.

Through our self-study, we leveraged the trust we had built with each other and risked portraying low self-esteem by acknowledging that ego plays a vital role in teaching. Much research has been conducted linking Maslow's (1954) needs theory with teacher satisfaction. High teacher satisfaction is directly related to high self-esteem, autonomy, and self-actualization (eg: Sweeney, 1981; Trusty and Sergiovanni, 1966). Perhaps more importantly, teacher satisfaction plays a key role in teaching effectiveness. According to Wigfield and Eccles (1992), teacher effectiveness is impacted by intrinsic value (how enjoyable teaching is), utility value (how important teaching is), and attainment value (how important

it is to teach well). In other words, effective teachers think teaching is enjoyable, important, and that they are good at it.

Each of us is comfortable divulging that we think we are good teachers. Each of us has won teaching awards, receives consistently high evaluations from our students and peers, and portrays a healthy balance of confidence and open-mindedness in our classrooms. Yet, through our self-study, we learned that our confidence in our teaching effectiveness online is substantially lower than in our FTF teaching. We examined how three supposedly exceptional teachers with associated confidence feel somewhat insecure about our online teaching.

As we began to explore why we felt less sure of our teaching effectiveness online, our study focused on the role of feedback in our teaching. As instructors committed to maximizing our students' learning, we frequently reflect on and analyse the extent to which we are able to provide meaningful feedback to our students in our online courses. There is little doubt that effective feedback increases discourse and can make a profound impact on learning and student satisfaction (Garrison and Anderson, 2003; Rovai, 2007). Our online courses, much like our FTF courses, are replete with various forms of effective formative and summative feedback. Feedback, however, is not merely an instructor-to-student construct. Instructors receive feedback as well as give feedback.

In our online courses, student-to-instructor summative feedback takes the same form as in our FTF courses, namely end-of-course evaluations. Although our student and peer evaluations suggest our teaching effectiveness online is equal to our FTF courses, good teaching is more difficult for students to determine in online courses (Ham and Davey, 2005). Compared with summative feedback, however, formative feedback in our online courses is substantially different, if not less, compared to our FTF courses.

In our FTF courses, we receive numerous signals confirming the correctness and adequacy of our behaviours (Ashford and Cummings, 1983; Vancouver and Morrison, 1995). Students in our FTF courses nod, smile, and write down what we say, each of which validates our competence. Additionally, they signal uncertainty and confusion, providing us with diagnostic feedback of our practice. For example, Derek noted:

When I present a concept via a lecture supplemented by a PowerPoint presentation in a FTF course, I progress through the slides receiving signals, verbal and nonverbal, from my students. My students might nod, smile, or jot down notes, signalling that they received my message positively. Conversely, they might express a look of confusion or

bewilderment, or simply ask a clarifying question when they are unclear about what I am trying to teach. Throughout my presentation of the content, I receive and interpret countless signals from my students adjusting my pace and depth of explanation according to what I think my students need.

When I present that same concept to my students in an online course, I record my lecture, with my voice over the PowerPoint slides, and post it for my students to view and listen. Essentially, they are getting the same content – the same slides, the same description, and the same examples – as in my FTF course. One key difference in my online courses lies in my ability to assess my teaching effectiveness based on the feedback I receive from my students. Ostensibly, students can e-mail me for clarification or post questions in a discussion board, though they seldom do. In my online courses, I receive fewer formative signals from my students, and consequently, I am less able to monitor and adjust my teaching.

Sandy described her search for formative feedback signals as one of “mining the postings” and reading between the lines of written text. As she read postings, she was cognizant of the content, but she was also looking for hints of confusion, opportunities to add a resource, or student insights that could be stretched and probed. Student postings provided evidence as to the directions students chose as they charted their own course in their learning, and Sandy consciously searched for indications of those directions so that she could support them as needed. Resources in response to student interests would have been provided in a FTF class in the same way, but it was in the process used to determine what was needed that Sandy found the difference. For example, in a FTF classroom, one might divide the class into groups, and although the instructor can circulate, it is not possible to hear all of the discussions. However, online, it is possible to “hear” it all, and everyone’s voice can be a source of feedback to the instructor.

In addition, the number of postings on topics or references to particular content served as a type of feedback for Sandy, those times when discussions seem to “explode.” For example, within the study of poetry, students raised the issue of nursery rhymes and their current use or non-use, and potential with young children. This issue seemed to strike a chord as students discussed the merits of nursery rhymes for young children and the extent to which they were or were not used in schools. Although students were not aware that their comments were serving as feedback to Sandy as to the value of the content they were exploring,

the depth of the discussion revealed that this was a meaningful topic they wished to explore.

Since the 1980's, researchers studying computer mediated communication (CMC) have determined FTF learning has a higher media "richness" than CMC groups, based on four criteria: feedback, multiple cues, language variety, and personal focus (Barkhi et al., 1999). The more ambiguous a learning event is the more one benefits from the media richness of FTF communication (Sun and Cheng, 2007). Certainly, teaching can be an ambiguous task. It often isn't clear if we are doing a good job.

Inseparable from our desires to maximize our students' learning are our desires to verify and confirm that we are effective at what we are trying to do. Feedback informs practice and helps instructors regulate their behaviour and meet their goals (Ashford et al., 2003). One purpose of seeking feedback from our students is to improve our teaching, and interconnected, their learning. In organizational behaviour research, feedback seeking behaviour (FSB) is often regarded as a means to acquire information in order improve to one's job performance (Ashford, 1986). At the core, it is this motive that drives any self-study – to improve one's practice.

Beyond a means to assess and improve their job performance, people often seek feedback for self-verification and self-enhancement purposes. It is important to note that feedback is different from other types of information (Ashford and Cummings, 1983). "As feedback is information about the self, it is more emotionally charged" (Ashford et al., 2003, p. 779). Feedback is directly related to one's pride and ego. While negative feedback can damage one's self-confidence, positive feedback can raise one's esteem. When using feedback for self-verification, people seek to confirm that they are performing as they expect to, thereby validating their self-concept, good or bad (Swann, 1996). When seeking feedback of self-enhancement, however, people focus only on those indicators that foster a positive self-concept (Brown and Dutton, 1995).

By using self-study methodology, we were able to focus on feedback for self-assessment purposes. Though we concentrated on feedback that was objective and diagnostic, it was impossible to completely separate our need for verification and enhancement purposes. We uncovered our need for positive, affirming feedback from our students about our teaching. For example, in one of his reflections, Derek wrote, "I feel like I don't know if I am doing a good job. When I teach online, I don't get the smiles and nods, and I miss that." We have found that we enjoy teaching, that we want to do it effectively, and that we want to be reassured that we are good at what we do. Paramount to our teaching confidence and efficacy is feedback, whether FTF or online.

Application of our New Learning

Beyond our heightened awareness of how interpreting feedback presents distinct challenges in our online courses, we sought to use our new understanding to make our teaching more effective and to lessen our insecurity. By extending beyond this first layer of insight, we were able to derive applicable knowledge from and for our practice (Loughran, 2004). What follows are descriptions of how we applied our new learning about online teaching.

Through our self-study, we began to understand how the feedback from our students is vital to validating our competence and to helping us modify our teaching to meet our students' needs. Because we value feedback and because feedback in an online environment is different from FTF teaching, we have had to seek other means of receiving feedback from our students. End of course student evaluations are not sufficient. We have learned to seek feedback about activities and assignments regularly and explicitly. Additionally, we learned to look for additional clues from our students about our teaching. While students in our online courses cannot nod and smile, they might make a post in a discussion board that signifies not only their learning but also their excitement about the topic, both of which can be attributed to the instructor's competence.

Suzanne found that students also wanted to give feedback to her as they progressed through the semester. Frequently, when students submitted a Module Assessment assignment, they would include feedback on how the assignment worked for them. For example, when submitting a multi-genre paper, a student stated, "My assignment is attached. I haven't taken the time to write poetry for quite awhile. It was nice to have the opportunity." Feedback was given when assignments did not work for a student such as this comment on that same assignment, "Attached is my Module 2 assessment. I found it difficult to write a response this way! I think I would enjoy writing a story in this multi-genre fashion, but writing a reflection on the strategies seemed strange for me?!" As a result of these opposite responses of students, Suzanne is considering offering more choice in this assessment and is continuing to monitor student comments to see if that improves the assignment.

To compensate for the uncertainty surrounding his perceived effectiveness, including both the extent to which his students were grasping the course material and valuing his course, Derek moved to gather student feedback that was more formative. One simple, yet effective strategy involved his requiring students to post in WebCT one brief "take-away" each week. Derek asked his students to identify, in two to three sentences, one key learning from the week.

These brief posts validated Derek's teaching and provided him information to regulate his teaching of subsequent activities.

For all three of us, our end-of-course student feedback has been almost all positive in our online courses. This has raised questions for further research. Is there a difference in the tone of student feedback between FTF and online courses? Do students feel comfortable expressing negative comments to an online instructor? Do students take the evaluations seriously when they never see the instructor? This is an area for further reflection and study as we continue our research.

CONCLUSION

As teachers, both FTF and online, we share many beliefs about effective teaching, one of which is that feedback from our students is vital to validating our competence and to helping us modify our teaching to meet our students' needs. Though we hold this belief firmly, we acknowledge that it manifests differently in our online courses. Teacher satisfaction plays a key role in teaching effectiveness, yet the extent to which we receive ongoing, formative feedback in our online courses is substantially different compared to our FTF courses. Feedback informs our practice, and if we seek to improve our craft we must determine ways to gather and analyze feedback from our students online. Absent the nods, smiles, and various facial expressions common to FTF teaching, our interpretation of our students' interest and understanding online is substantially different. We recognize that feedback is vital to our emotional and teaching well-being and that if we are to improve our practice we must continue to search for meaningful student feedback in our online courses.

The extent to which we enjoy our profession cannot be overstated. Each of us believes this yearlong study has improved our teaching practice in our online classes by making student feedback more visible and meaningful. We have become more aware of how and when student feedback is provided in this context.

This research has also strengthened our desire to continue learning about the differences in our teaching and in ourselves as teachers in face-to-face and online contexts.

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