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The Multiple Meanings of “Hybrid”: Studying Adult Student Experiences in Hybrid (Web-Enhanced) Classes While Learning How to do Qualitative Research

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Abstract: *This paper has a two-fold or “hybrid” purpose: (1) to discuss the results of a qualitative study of adult students experiences of web-enhanced or hybrid classes, and (2) to briefly discuss the process of learning to do qualitative research while conducting this study in a qualitative research methods class.*

We live in a new millennium, a digital age that is changing many of the processes of higher education. Many universities are offering entire degree programs online, and most offer at least some online classes. Further, according to Young (2002) many instructors are teaching in a hybrid format: a format that is partially face to face but has some components of the course work and class discussion online. Such a format is expected to become more typical than a strictly face-to face class in the future. To be sure, there’s been much discussion and research of online learning (Shrumm, 1998; Youngblood et al, 2001)), some of which focuses more particularly on adult learners (Daley et al, 2001; Tisdell, Strohschen et al., 2004). However there’s been little research on how students respond to hybrid or *web-enhanced* classes, particularly when they signed up for classes that they assumed were face-to-face. This perhaps can increase student anxiety, particularly among adult learners who are likely to have less experience with the use of computer mediated discussion than younger learners. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine how adult students (older than age 25) who have completed at least one web-enhanced class where at least 15% of the course requirement was based on online discussion, viewed the experience of web-enhanced classes, and how they view its impact on their overall learning. But our purpose in this article is also a hybrid one: it is not only to talk about the study itself, but also to talk briefly about aspects of learning to conduct qualitative research, as participants and co-researchers conducting this study in a qualitative research methods class.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the work of Tu and McIsaac (2002) who assert, in drawing on work done in the larger field of sociology, that those who experience a higher degree of “social presence” report greater satisfaction with that context. They define social presence as the extent to which participants feel that there is awareness of real communication in its multiple dimensions with others in an interaction in a particular context. In applying this to online contexts, they studied the specific ways 51 students experienced social presence in the online learning environment, and evaluated their results across three dimensions: social context, online communication, and interactivity. Participants valued the online social context that promoted familiarity with other participants, trust, informal communication as well as communication about the subject being studied, and a positive experience and attitude toward technology. Online communication was positively valued if it was expressive, included affect and emotion, and was easy to understand. Interaction that was immediate, invited a response, and discussed familiar topics yielded a high level of social presence. These factors were able to provide a satisfactory substitution for the fact that FTF communication was missing. Participants with strong computer skills, and the availability of immediate technical support were factors that

added to satisfaction with online learning. In many ways their study supports the findings of some of the studies of online learning in adult education (Daley et al., 2001; Tisdell et al, 2004). Our intent here was to apply the idea of social presence to the study of web-enhanced learning.

Methodology

This research project took place in the context of a qualitative research methods class, where those of us who are students were learning to do qualitative research under the guidance of the instructor. The purpose of the course was to learn how to develop a purpose statement of the problem being investigated, design a qualitative research study, collect the data and write up the findings. As noted above, we sought to learn not only if and how “social presence” was experienced in web-enhanced classes, but how adult students perceive that it affected their learning. We chose this particular research topic partly because the research course itself was web-enhanced, and we all had had prior experience of participating in web-enhanced hybrid classes. Furthermore, due to the increasingly stringent rules of the institutional review board at our university, it would not have been possible to secure IRB permission in a timely enough manner for each participant to conduct a pilot study related to her/his individual interests. Thus, prior to the start of the course, we agreed on a research project in which we could all serve as co-researchers while learning the rigors of qualitative research by both reading about and doing it.

Research perspective. In light of this as background information, the research perspective of this qualitative study was informed by a social constructionism which assumes that human beings construct knowledge rather than find it (Schwandt, 2000), and that both participants and researchers make further meaning of a phenomenon as they discuss it. As a social constructionist qualitative study, we discussed our own experience of the phenomenon as a way to make further meaning of our own online learning experience as well as understanding the experience of the participants in the study. It is partially out of our own experience of this phenomenon that we designed the interview questions, and analyzed the data.

The hybrid nature of participants and data. The criteria for participant selection for the study itself were that participants be older than 25, have completed at least one web-enhanced class with at least 15% of the course be conducted through online discussion. There were 12 participants in the study. Technically, we were not participants in the study itself except as co-researchers, yet we all fit the criteria for participant selection, and clearly drew on our own experience in framing the questions, and in making sense of the data. Thus, we were sort of hybrid participants. Furthermore, the typical methods of data collection in qualitative research are interviews, observations, and documents (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). But as Bianco and Carr-Chellman (2002) discuss, we had to wonder whether online discussions were “observations” or “documents”. They are in fact kind of a hybrid. In this study of the 12 participants, the primary means of data collection were audiotaped (and transcribed) face-to-face interviews of approximately one hour in length. Given the research paradigm of social constructionism in use for the study, the interviews were approached as a shared conversation, and all participants knew that the co-researchers had also participated in web-enhanced classes. Documents of online conversations in web-enhanced classes were additional sources of data. These data were analyzed according to the constant comparative method (Merriam 1998).

Given that we all had our own experience of web-enhanced learning in hybrid classes, naturally we made further meaning of our own experiences as we analyzed the data. But once our data analysis was “complete”, in our final face-to-face class, we participated in a further act of making meaning of the data and our own experience, which was participating in what West

Walsh and Charaniya (2000) call the Collaborative Inquiry Metaphor Creation and Analysis Method (CIMCAM), where we made a visual “metaphor” as a response to “My experience of web-enhanced learning is like...”. We spent 20 minutes creating our response, and the next approximate hour sharing our response. This was also taped and transcribed. This added layer provided a new dimension to our own learning, both of how to do qualitative research and of our own web-enhanced experience, given that for us in this case, the two are enmeshed. But to be clear, in what follows we will discuss the key findings of the study itself of the 12 participants and touch briefly on what we learned about doing qualitative research in our conclusions.

Key Findings of the Study Itself

There were four primary but overlapping areas of findings that related to the 12 interview participants experience and to their learning: (1) the affective dimensions of learning; (2) the multi-dimensions of time; (3) the significance of interaction and feedback; (4) the importance of a structure. These are discussed below.

Affective Dimensions of Learning

While none of the participants reported being adamantly opposed to a blended or hybrid learning environment, most participants reported both positive and negative feelings about it. Feelings of uncertainty or apprehension were a common initial reaction. This was often attributed to technological unfamiliarity or to not knowing the other course participants. For the most part, these types of fears were transient and dissipated over time, as the participants grew more comfortable with the technology and with each other. The use of bulletin boards for general discussion and to answer instructor-provided questions was another aspect of blended learning that was frequently mentioned, although it engendered different affective reactions among the learners. Some appreciated the opportunity to reflect before participating in discussions; however, for others, the public nature of posting --and the potential for misinterpretation--was a source of particular concern. As one participant relates “on chat...you’re stark naked out there... you can be saying things and it could be interpreted completely differently.” While most were able to overcome their reluctance to posting, the anxiety was more pronounced and pervasive for a few of the participants who found the discussion groups to be particularly intimidating. One participant related that she enjoys reading the postings by others; yet when it comes times to respond, “I get frozen in fear. I could sign on a hundred times and not write anything...I’m thinking that doesn’t sound smart enough; that’s not deep enough.” This pressure to perform and wariness of being judged were echoed by another participant who, even in her second blended learning course, struggles with an internalized need “to come up with something scholarly.”

By contrast, many were pleasantly surprised at how positively they felt about many dimensions of the web-enhanced experience. Some reported the joy of discovering they shared similar life experiences, or were heartened to share with each other in ways that might not have in a traditional classroom--“If you’re in routine classroom environment, you always have the people who are the talkers--who are always wanting to answer the questions first, wanting to monopolize the time sometimes. And sometimes you don’t get to meet the other people who are quieter in the classroom. The online component gave everybody the opportunity to participate and to read each other’s work and to get to know one another a little better. It made us closer.”

Time

In regards to time, most appreciated not having to take the time physically to go to class, but talked about the time online learning takes. A benefit centered on its convenience, e.g., “certainly the personal benefits are flexibility as far as scheduling when you were on-line to meet

your own needs”; “I was pretty happy because I didn’t have to drive an hour and fifteen minutes to attend class as often”; and “I could do my homework at 2 am in my pajamas...” However, many participants were surprised at the amount of time required for the online component; e.g., “in some ways the on-line is more time consuming. Again, when you went to class, you knew it was from this hour to this hour, and then it was over and it was over until the next week. With the on-line, it was more of a constant day-to-day, and you wanted to go on and see if anyone posted a response to your reply”; and “it does require a lot of time, you know, spending time reading through what they say and then responding to them. It can be time consuming.”

While there was clearly ambivalence about issues of time in online learning there was general agreement that it enhanced learning; participants felt that the time to go back and look at what is said increased learning. As one participant noted, “I like to think about things...one-to-one, you just respond immediately...So, I think in some ways you can think about things better.”

Interaction and Feedback

Many of the study participants indicated a preference for face-to face learning because in an online environment they were unable to utilize eye contact, verbal intonations, and non-verbal body language in making a point or in deciphering what others posted. For some, this translated into an enhanced need for feedback as the following examples show: “I need instant gratification. I need to know now--I don’t want to finish a whole sentence or a whole paper...and then get the feedback”; and “if I write, and I don’t get feedback from other people, or from the instructor, then perhaps I am left wondering, what I wrote, did it make sense, or did it, was it insulting to somebody else, or was it not clear, and why no, did nobody comment on it.” For others, however, while the online component didn’t take the place of a classroom, it offered a “different type of a relationship”; one which keeps people connected and in which the interaction on a given topic could be extended or explored to a proper closure without the typical time and schedule constraints of a face to face session.

It is clear that most participant thought having instructor feedback was important, though they varied on the amount and the degree to which the instructor should direct the discussion, as noted in the following comments: “I think the instructor needs to be able to be there and facilitate discussion...getting the students back on track; and “faculty members would have to direct the discussion. If they see it going in a personal direction, then I think they need to redirect their discussion. They have to be very positive and ask to the students ‘have you considered this perspective?’ Some people take liberties that they definitely would not take in a traditional environment.” But there were also many that centered more on the students’ responsibility to create a learning community in combination with the instructor’s presence as indicated in the following comments, “I think you own the responsibility as a student to make sure that it is a lively discussion and that it’s purposeful and that it works...in the classroom, it’s the instructor’s responsibility to keep the class lively and entertaining; being on the web puts some of that responsibility and ownership on the student. When I think community in the classroom I just think of the give and take and the sharing, in the classroom setting I think it’s viewed as optional, on the web it’s a necessity.” Still others focused more exclusively on the student’s responsibility: “at our age and level of educational, no I do not think a faculty member should be monitoring it. We should be mature enough not to need this.” Nevertheless, what is clear that interaction and feedback from peers and the instructor is important to quality online learning.

The Importance of Structure

Lastly participants felt that the development of a specific but flexible structure for on-line learning was important to quality online discussion. They generally felt that it was the

instructor's responsibility to create a structure that was organized and made discussion as easy as possible, that the instructor be clear on his or her expectations on the amount and types of posting expected. They recognized the challenges to this, and noted the instructor must have "the ability to design meaningful assignments that are also challenging", as well as explain how to use the technology." This includes determining the appropriate mix of activities and content material, e.g., "there are just certain topics that lend themselves to more discussion online than certain ones that I think it would be better to be face to face where you can have someone show you how it works or give you a little bit more hands-on; certain topics that lend themselves to more discussion online than others." Some participants found it helpful to be assigned to small groups for online discussions as opposed to being "overwhelmed" by trying to keep up with numerous postings on several topics in a large group, i.e., "people were throwing out new ideas, but yet discussing old ideas all at the same time. There needs to be certain objectives. So, I don't think that you can just have people speaking back and forth off the cuff. A question needs to be posed and people need to answer it within a certain amount of time, and then given time to respond to one another." Several suggested that an orientation session be incorporated into blended learning offerings so that expectations are clear (e.g., frequency of posting), and any questions relating to technology can be raised. Those in classes of more than ten, preferred having smaller discussion groups online, and felt that instructors should organize classes in such a way to make the online environment more manageable. As noted above, while there was some variety of opinion on what the instructor's role should be, it is clear instructors need to provide a flexible structure, need to be as clear as possible about expectations, and to provide feedback

Discussion and Conclusions

While the findings need to be interpreted with caution, and cannot be applied to web-enhanced or hybrid courses in all settings, it does seem that most did feel that the web-based component of these hybrid classes ultimately did facilitate greater learning. The factors of social presence as discussed by Tu and McIsaac (2002) were best facilitated when questions focused on the connection between issues in the reading and learners' experience. Participants felt that they not only understood ideas better, but they developed relationships with their peers, in spite of the fact that they missed some of the nonverbal components of face-to-face interaction. While there's some variety of opinion about the degree to which instructors should "control" the direction of the discussion or be involved in it, it is clear that study participants felt that when people (both instructor and students) "show up" online and are prepared, bringing their intellect and life experience with them, that these online experiences contributed to a sense of community. To be sure, it is clear that while not all the participants *prefer* the online components of the class, and the intimidation and other anxiety factors need to be mediated, in nearly all cases study participants felt that with good interaction and a consistent but flexible structure to guide online interaction, the online component enhanced their learning, and contributed to a greater "social presence" of everyone overall, since it allowed for being present and learning in multiple ways. The hybrid nature of the web-enhanced class, allows for another mode of learning.

So what did we learn about doing qualitative research, in our hybrid experience of not being "official" participants, but of fitting all criteria of our official participants? The answer perhaps is best described in light of the research perspective of social constructionism that informed the research methodology. This research perspective assumes that the participants and researchers continue to make further meaning of the phenomenon as they dialogue and further reflect on the phenomena. This clearly was true for us as co-researchers in the process. But the

act of doing the research, helped us also make further meaning of our own experience in hybrid courses. Further, the CIMCAM experience of creating a metaphorical representation of how each of us view the experience of learning in hybrid classes, and our discussion of our metaphorical experience, shed new light on it in different ways, as we further constructed knowledge through this social interaction. It increased our own “social presence” through sharing of metaphorical knowledge. Indeed, we used this with ourselves in our final face-to-face meeting to make further meaning of the data, and not as a data collection with the “official” participants. But in reflecting on CIMCAM as a potential data collection method, Gail, who had created a spider in a web to describe her experience, noted “What I learned from CIMCAM as a data collection process is that expressing results/opinion/data in a novel manner often opens the participant to viewing the information in a broader context which may provide richer data in the long run. I do not know if I would have thought of the online experience as a web that drew me in without the challenge of expressing my feelings in an alternate form. I would have said, enjoyable, addicting, but never used the active feeling of being drawn in.” So just as hybrid classrooms offer deeper learning in multiple dimensions, so too do multiple sources of data collection hybrids take meaning to deeper levels as it is expressed in multiple dimensions.

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