All-American Apple Pie or Chocolate Sundae: A Cyber-Environment for Adult Education

Mark Federman
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada

Marilyn Laiken
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada

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Mark Federman and Marilyn Laiken
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada

Abstract: Conventional cyber-education environments do not actualize adult education principles. A design that implements Grace's (1998) Theory of Adult Learning Community is demonstrated.

A plethora of recent research has focused attention on barriers and enablers to adoption, implementation, and design of effective cyber-education approaches. However, the problematics of the most common cyber-education environment – threaded forums – have been identified among a number of researchers (Klemm, 2002; Serce and Yildirim, 2006; Thomas, 2002).

Adult educators must ask whether espoused principles of Adult Education can be enacted in a cyber-education environment. Federman (2006) argues that threaded-forum-based cyber-education is hegemonic and reproduces traditional teacher-student power dynamics. In particular, the focus on instrumentality and interactions with the instructor rather than learner peers, and isolation of student's ideas, contrasts with espoused virtues of collaboration, conversation, and interaction that pervade cyber-education discourse (Pelz, 2004; Haythornthwaite, 2006).

A cyber-education environment for adult learners was implemented for a graduate course using wiki and Skype technologies. The particular course was selected for its objective to create a collaborative, action research environment fostering transformative learning among students. It was offered in Fall, 2006 with fourteen students and two co-facilitators. Grace's (1998) Theory of Adult Learning Community is used as a rubric for judging the successful enactment of adult education precepts in cyber-presence. Grace's theory comprises six principles: [G1] equalization of roles among educators and learners; [G2] a focus on knowledge production rather than knowledge consumption; [G3] the incorporation of praxis in areas of collective change; [G4] constructivist approaches to identity and meaning making; [G5] politicization of the learning environment; and [G6] explicit recognition of the effects of culture and power.

Although the week-to-week pace of the course was pre-set, students were instructed that they could change any other aspect of the course content or process, having full control of the wiki environment. The participation component of the grade – 40% of the final mark – was self, or small student-group evaluated. Weekly activities involved reading from a prescribed set of materials (which could be changed or augmented), self-assigning small groups to work on suggested probes (or additional, student-proposed probes), participating in other's small groups, and reflecting on process in individual learning journals and on a feedback page. A mid-course check-up specifically asked for critique and suggestions, many of which were immediately implemented through design and process changes. There was also a dialogue exercise (Bohm, Factor & Garrett, 1991) via Skype, and a final feedback session prior to marks being submitted.

Although students took up many of the roles usually fulfilled by instructors [G1], many had difficulty shedding their preconceptions of imposed hegemonic limitations. As one observed, responding to others' complaints about perceived limitations on their power: "we were only limited by our own notions re what we could and could not do within this environment. Perhaps this is simply a product of our own conditioning within education settings over the years."

Initially, students responded to probes by reproducing content, effectively, "term papers on the questions posed." As they became used to both the nature of the environment and their learning community, "there has been room for true exploration, mistakes, reflection which for me is essential in a learning environment." Another reports: "I was challenged, I struggled, and I came out … 'confused at a higher level'" [G2]. Students also struggled with making connections between the course material, "so relevant to many situations," and daily experiences [G3], because, "people that I encounter haven't encountered the things I have read or learned about."

There was an ongoing tension between group and individual identity in knowledge construction [G4], manifest as whether or not to sign one's contributions. Although a norm could have been established by instructor fiat or group concertive control, deliberately leaving the question ambiguous encourages the participants to examine a crucial issue in emergent identity, typically unexamined in physical classrooms and conventional cyber-environments. Developing behavioural norms also became a site of political challenge for the participants [G5]; unique social and political dynamics created by the wiki environment encourages managing ongoing polarities and negotiation of norms as part of the learning experience. This realization occurred to many only upon later reflection. Relative power [G6] also manifest as frustration for some students, demonstrated as a torrid rant on the feedback page, ironic because the students clearly felt sufficiently safe to critique the instructors prior to marks being set.

The wiki-based course's process is made explicit throughout its design and realization. Compared to many physical presence, and most online courses, control is passed from traditional teacher role to students, through relinquishing assigning marks for participation, enabling the self-evaluation of the dialogue exercise, and encouraging open and frank conversations about process, including critiquing the assumptions, methods, and administration of the course itself.

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