Chapter 18

Toward a New Standard of Quality in Online Learning:
Critical Interaction and the Death of the Online Instructor

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how Barthes's concept of writerly/readerly texts can be applied to enrich our understanding of interaction in online courses. Writerly texts are texts that require the reader to actively participate in the production of the text's meaning, whereas readerly texts offer only a limited number of possible interpretations. Barthes privileges the writerly text because it pictures the reader in an active posture, in the role of co-writer, jointly producing meaning rather than passively receiving it. The authors argue that the writerly/readerly opposition provides a powerful tool with which we can reconceptualize the relationship between the instructional content of online courses and the students who encounter them. Such an approach will allow us a fuller understanding of not only the interpretive nature of the learning process, but also of the advantages inherent in empowering students in that process. Furthermore, this approach will allow us to better understand and measure quality in online courses.

Without Contraries is no progression.

William Blake (1793/1988, p. 34)

INTRODUCTION

Online learning has evolved considerably over its first decade and a half of existence, but many of the major issues facing it at its inception still remain.

While technologies continue to improve and the numbers of courses and participating institutions continue to grow, the question of quality in online courses has never been adequately addressed, perhaps because doing so would require a task of unimaginable complexity. One of the chief causes of this is simply the difficulty in defining what constitutes quality and what it would really mean to measure something that is so elusive and contested in a way that is not ultimately too simplistic or reductive. While thousands of articles, hundreds of books, and countless conference presentations have all attempted to explore the subject of quality in online learning, there does seem to be a general consensus among commentators on what constitutes good practice in the online classroom, and no one would argue—regardless of their ideological, philosophical, political, or even commercial perspective—that online learning is "good enough" in its current state; therefore much work is left to be done in developing a richer understanding of the possibilities afforded by ever-improving instructional technologies and pedagogical practices.

While the digital campus could never fully replicate the traditional environment of the college campus—and this is true on many levels: socially, instructionally, developmentally, even aesthetically—the same can be said for the online classroom. Regardless of one's particular attitude toward online learning, however, we must recognize that, at least for the foreseeable future, it is not going to go away for a variety of reasons. While the ramifications of its continued presence and growth are open to debate, whether or not it threatens the core of what we consider to be of most value about the university, it is the responsibility of the university to ensure that what online learning does in the name of the university is not a travesty.

That is not to say that the online classroom should seek merely to replicate the traditional classroom. It is highly unlikely that the best classroom practice can be replicated online, but it is equally unlikely that these best practices can be widely replicated in the traditional classroom either. Even more unlikely is the notion that we could ever clearly identify any kind of replicable essential element that makes the "best" practices best. The presumed existence of this sort of *je ne sais quoi*, and more importantly the qualities that make it unknowable, is behind much of the difficulty in establishing a universally effective model for online teaching and learning. This mystical reality, this essence of good teaching, is simply not something that can be reduced to a dependent variable; nor is it translatable into any kind of statistical formulae or, for that matter, into theoretical exposition. Therefore, the comparison between traditional and online learning is at best problematic, especially when we recognize that virtually all of the education research outside of that which focuses on the online classroom tends to be fairly critical of the quality of instruction in the traditional classroom, particularly at the higher education level. One need not look far to find that the fetishism of this traditional classroom is merely an unfounded rumor.

Our search for this *je ne sais quoi* that represents the "best" of educational practice also demonstrates the value of a postmodern or poststructuralist approach to education. Through the lens of poststructuralism, we can recognize the search for a reified "best of" as a demonstration of the metaphysics of presence, a search for a transcendental signified. While we believe that there can be quality online courses, such quality cannot be easily quantified or automatically implemented. More importantly, the best university education experiences, whether online or in the classroom, are experiences that allow the student/reader an opportunity to participate dialogically in the production of meaning in the classroom. First, however, we must look at the concept of interaction.

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