

Chapter 16

E-Learning and the Disciplines: Lessons from Applied Linguistics

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ABSTRACT

Pressed into unfamiliar terrain, academics may harbor resentment at being re-defined through the prism of e-learning. What if the tables were turned? The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate how one academic re-shaped e-learning through the lens of his own specialization, generating insights that potentially benefit online instruction across the disciplines. An applied linguistics stance on e-learning offers critical insights into online communication, pedagogy and enhancing a sense of community. The latest findings from this field add substance and rigor to the ways we design and engage online instruction, affirming the sense that e-learning potentially rivals the spontaneity and magic of brick-and-mortar classroom settings. The author concludes by posing ways other discipline areas may illuminate ongoing institutional conversations regarding virtues of online instruction.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this chapter is to model a pathway out of a persistent roadblock in the trajectory of online instruction. As accreditation and market forces have rocketed institutional commitments outward into cyberspace, many faculty members feel pressed into unfamiliar territory. Some of us cling desperately to daimons of academic freedom or union contracts, digging ourselves a firm defensive trench, refusing to be redefined through a techno-lens. Another common reactive stance is to disavow any special status for online vs. traditional face-to-face instructional contexts: apples to apples. A more common stance is a reluctant, cynical form of engagement that surrenders any deep, critical integration of e-learning into notions of teaching one's discipline. In doing so, the instructional designer is endowed with an inappropriately numinous status as the great alchemist of teaching [fill in the subject area here] online. This author has worked in close collaboration with instructional designers. Most will readily admit that they do not want this sort of pedagogically divine status, though they may provide a valuable service to the faculty member whose commitment to his or her academic area vastly outweighs the commitment to its teaching.

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E-Learning and the Disciplines

All three of the aforementioned stances are passive and all suggest a unidirectional, shallow level of engagement, and most of us, regardless of our school of affiliation (Education, Arts, Sciences, etc.), can admit to having experienced at least one of these perspectives at one time or another. There is, however, the possibility of a more active stance, the possibility of openness to deeper levels of professional identity and engagement in online instruction that center on our deepest-held virtues of teaching within our particular field. Working from the inside out, there is the promise of restoring a sense of agency and empowerment, an integration (or logical sublation) of the current technical-pedagogical polarity that pervades the current culture of online teaching in higher education (Warford, 2014). The parenthetical reference in the previous sentences suggests that this process of uniting our deepest-held truths about teaching and learning in our discipline with the latest technological tools may be experienced synthetically as a fusion of previously unrelated ideas and things or *analytically* as the unfolding of a pre-existing unity within a less unilateral, more logically nuanced stance on online learning (Giegerich, 2007). Ultimately, the preference for one ontological stance or the other is up to the reader. The author's work to redefine himself professionally around e-learning could very well be likened to a synthetic grafting of apples onto oranges or conversely, a Hegelian dialectic analysis of some notion that is logically the essence of both apple and orange. Perhaps by the end of this chapter, it will become clearer to all of us which epistemology prevails, at least with regard to our own experiences of working through notions of engagement in online learning. As a language methodologist and Spanish instructor, the author's principal research area is applied linguistics, particularly within the branches of second language acquisition, discourse analysis, language pedagogy. An applied linguistics stance on the scholarship of e-learning offers some critical insights into the nature of online engagement.

Getting back to the core (or 'seed', if you prefer oranges) purpose of this chapter, this chapter shows how one instructor has moved from one of passive consumer of techno-tools to a stance in which the scholarship area has pushed back on the technology juggernaut, putting educational technologies to work in service to both research inquiry and pedagogical practices. This reversal in the directionality in what we may call the scholarship of online teaching offers faculty a way back into the driver's seat and suggest ways their own scholarly work might contribute to the emergent foundation of professional literature on online pedagogy. In short, this chapter, in addition to starting a conversation about seeing e-learning through the academic area, centers on the latest findings from one particular academic discipline, applied linguistics, as they relate to the quality of online community and the optimization of interaction and membership in online community and enhancing rigor in online pedagogy.

BACKGROUND

Applied Linguistics and Three Clusters that Illuminate Student Engagement in Online Learning

The field of applied linguistics is incredibly diverse. As an instructor of Spanish and language pedagogy, the author has focused on two branches, in particular: analysis of classroom interaction and discourse analysis of writing samples, within sociolinguistics, and second language acquisition (SLA), with an emphasis on implications for language pedagogy. With regard to lessons from applied linguistics for e-learning, these fields yield three clusters that will direct the core content of this chapter: the dynamics of discourse and interaction, mediational pedagogy, and fostering classroom community. Across all of

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