Chapter 22
Creating Dialogical Spaces in Blended Environments:
A Case Study of Classroom Design in Two English Literature Courses

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a case study of two English literature courses (one graduate course taught in the Spring 2010 semester and one undergraduate course in the Fall 2011 semester) at Troy University's Dothan, AL, campus analyzing student engagement in relation to the learning environment. Both of these courses presented challenges in facilitating classroom discussion inhibited by the physical design of the learning space. To compensate for these physical limitations, both courses incorporated blended learning. One course was moved outdoors, thereby blending the traditional classroom with a non-traditional learning space, while the other incorporated a blended learning approach that used an online discussion board. Although such "relocations" of the learning space overcame initial barriers to student engagement and success, even the blended approach suggests that further research and investment in classroom design would improve student engagement in both traditional and blended classes by promoting dialogism in the classroom.

INTRODUCTION

This case study explores the effects of classroom design on student engagement and participation through class discussion. It analyzes the classroom that privileges the use of technology and furniture intended to accommodate the digital-aged and the non-traditional student over a classroom that fosters discussion employed in constructivist pedagogies that focus on critical thinking and problem-based learning. In such settings, it may be more beneficial to take students out of the brick-and-mortar classroom that resists adaptation and move them to another, less structured setting, which may give students a sense of egalitarianism and congeniality by placing them in an environment that is student- or community-

centered instead of one that is teacher- or media-centered. When available, the outdoors and online learning spaces—and activities that occur outside the face-to-face classroom—have the potential to give students more authority to "claim their education," as Adrienne Rich (1979) has posited. Such venues de-center the learning environment, allowing for interactions that are the basis of authentic learning.

In this chapter, I offer observations of two university English literature courses as an example of this hypothesis. They relate two instances in which interventions moved students out of a traditionally designed classroom, a location in which students were hesitant to participate through discussion, and into an environment that proved to be more conducive to dialogue for them. The conditions for learning in the new environment were less structured and produced a conviviality that enhanced the learning process. Meyers (2008) notes that less structured learning spaces, such as an online discussion board, can "often seem more collegial and informal" (p. 219) and can evoke in students "a greater willingness to disclose information," (p. 219) leading to the "sharing and sense of community" (p. 219) that is the foundation of critical pedagogy .

The purpose of this case study is to examine the way in which reconceiving the learning space by "relocating" it can effect change in student behavior, promoting discussion and encouraging students to engage with each other. Such examples as this suggest the need for further study and, perhaps, a reconsideration of classroom design in the future that will take into account not only student need for the use of media and furniture to accommodate the millennial and non-traditional student in the face-to-face classroom, but also the dialogism imperative for discussion that promotes critical thinking.

BACKGROUND

Paulo Freire's "banking method," observed and theorized in the early 1970s, seems to have come full-circle in today's classrooms. The "banking method," with which instructors by now have become very familiar, positions the students as empty "receptacles" into which the knowledge of the instructor is deposited (Freire, 2000). Also familiar to instructors is Freire's idea that this method is not one that actually teaches but only allows students to regurgitate facts the teacher provides them (Freire, 2000). Conversely, Freire advocates a pedagogy in which students are active participants engaged in the learning process, this participation taking the form of dialogue not only with the teacher, but also other students. Vygotsky's (1978) ideas about the role communication plays in learning support Freire's theories as well, and there is an established body of literature implicating dialogue and oral communication as necessary for student success (Cazden, 2001).

The physical design of a classroom can either facilitate or inhibit the dialogism necessary for authentic learning. Classrooms prior to Freire's time tended to discourage the possibility for discussion among all class members by preventing students from looking at each other, instead having them look at the back of their fellow students' heads in order to face the teacher. Yet the positioning and orientation of students in the classroom in relation to each other and the teacher can have profound effects on student participation. Studies conducted shortly after the publication of Freire's theories examined classroom environment and learning outcomes. These studies found that seating choice of students reflects achievement behavior (Wulf, 1976), certainly connected to learning, and that manipulations of seating arrangements often alter student behavior (Weinstein, 1979). Arnold, Britton-Simmons, and Williams, et.al. (1993) note that "straight rows and the teacher as the 'sage on the stage' were the norm" (p. 81) in classrooms

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