Online Classrooms as Porous Spaces

Katherine Turpin, *Iliff School of Theology*

Blog Series: Teaching with Digital Media
April 03, 2020
Tags: online teaching | online learning | digital media | online classrooms

When we first move into online classroom spaces, we often miss the dynamic energy of gathered bodies in a familiar location. We lose the immediate gratification of watching in real time as new knowledge "clicks" for students in discussions and class activities. Online classrooms may initially feel sterile, artificial, and indistinguishable from one another in our learning management system.

With time and experience in teaching in online classrooms, we may begin to reconsider how a traditional residential classroom is also an artificial space. Residential education occurs on the educational institution's "turf," asking students to put their relational connections, participation in the economy, and other vocational expressions on hold to enter into these four walls to be formed and informed. Traditional schooling is an attempt to engage life wisdom from across generations and cultures in a simulated environment that speeds knowledge acquisition and re-organizes it more efficiently from how we might naturally encounter it in life. There is nothing "natural" about a classroom with 12-200 students in it all trying to learn the same things at the same time, regardless of their existing experience or knowledge. What feels "traditional" about this education is actually a factory model of education largely adopted

during the industrial revolution for the sake of increasing access to and efficiency of education for the masses.

To be certain, online classrooms have many of the same constructed elements. However, they are also more porous than synchronous residential learning experiences. You may experience this in the plethora of Zoom meetings that are happening right now in the midst of staying-at-home as a part of Covid 19 mitigation. Suddenly, you see your students in their home contexts, sometimes with roommates, children, spouses, or pets wandering into the picture. The students' home contexts become a part of the teaching and learning milieu in more pressing ways when they stay embedded in them. While they are still engaging with a community seeking knowledge, they are also embedded in other relationships and contexts where that knowledge can be tested and integrated on a daily basis.

Another of the unique features of online spaces is the capacity for immediate linkage to communities and resources far beyond those of the "walled-in" residential classroom. Opportunities to have students video-conference with scholars or practitioners around the world, curate their own examples or applications of course content drawn from internet resources and their local context, or interact with external media or images related to the course are easy to arrange in online classrooms. This allows course content and the contexts in which knowledge is situated to expand in ways sometimes even beyond faculty expectations and expertise. By asking students to take the insights they are gaining into other settings or to make connections with external resources, faculty may find ways to make online interactions more analytical, more relevant to students' final vocational destinations, and more engaging for both students and faculty.

Additionally, porosity means that students can share learnings from the course through online forums from Twitter feeds to YouTube videos by linking to these in the online classroom. This practice serves as a way to test out ideas in other publics and to help students understand that ultimately this knowledge is not for regurgitation in a classroom setting for their instructor to judge but rather for integration and application in other settings. The longer I have taught online, the more I have become reluctant to serve as the primary audience for student written work. While I always read student work and provide the best feedback my own expertise and experiences with the material can provide, I find that they are better and more committed scholars when they know that what they are creating will find its way into a group who can benefit from what they are creating, whether their class colleagues or some other part of their community. Student papers are remarkably stronger when they know they will share them with their classroom colleagues or other external audiences in comparison to the ones that they will just dash off at the last minute to submit to me in order to complete an assignment. This strategy improves student formation by positioning them more regularly as persons whose knowledge impacts not only their experience but serves other communities as well. The space for collaborative exchange between students is so much easier to engage in porous online settings where students can share resources and insights easily through links and public postings.

There are times when the porosity of online classrooms can be concerning. It is helpful to protect some spaces where mistakes can be made and opinions shared that are within relationships of mutual accountability rather than in the general public. And in theological education where I teach, students are often accountable to ordination boards and hiring committees who may not yet need to witness their growth and development as they encounter new ideas. Some of those boundaries can be maintained in online classrooms to the extent that they can in the public space of a residential classroom. But the possibility of regularly opening up the classroom to the world outside the four walls is an engaging gift of online education.

https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/04/online-classrooms-as-porous-spaces/