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Hybrid Approaches: A Review of E-Learning Pedagogies and Their Prioritization of Building Communities Within Classrooms

1. Introduction

In the years following the COVID-19 lockdowns, what is now referred to as "The Post-Pandemic," mainstream media outlets have begun the process of whipping up the popular culture into a moral panic over rising student absences from school. However, the recent attention placed on student absenteeism has brought attention to the field of E-Learning – which includes online courses and hybrid courses – as a potential solution for this issue. This led me to wonder how the current and developing pedagogies within this field could handle increased class sizes if more and more education systems in more states were to move to hybrid and online course formats. Would these pedagogies adapt and allow for greater access to education, or would they simply recreate the same systems and barriers that have existed in traditional in-person classes? This question informed a great deal of my research and writing on this topic for this literature review.

However, one writer's work has come to form the major perspective of how I have come to see E-learning pedagogies and that is bell hooks; specifically her "Introduction" to *Teaching to Transgress* has shaped how I have come to see the e-pedagogies. Perhaps the thing I took to heart the most from this work was the need for teachers to facilitate and create classroom communities that can encourage learning.

I bring this up because hooks' perspectives have led me to see two major themes present in the body of scholarship that make up the pedagogy of e-learning. One of these themes involves developing pedagogies that treat e-learning – and the interfaces used to facilitate it – as tools that can be used to build and connect communities of learned with each other as much as with educators. The second theme involves building – and even expanding – current systems of education into digital spaces. E-pedagogies that hold to the second theme usually recreate systems of learning that reflect the banking model of education.

Generally older pedagogies in the field of e-learning were trying to feel-out how best to incorporate digital technologies and interfaces into classroom settings. Some key points of interest for many of these pedagogies included the facilitation of student cooperation, group interactions, and more communication between students regarding learning activities that involved digital interfaces.

On the other hand, more recent modes have suggested and outlined how to create massive open online courses (MOOCs) that promise open and free access to education, but whose class sizes may range from hundreds of students to thousands. Such pedagogies devalue student interactions with one another – and even student interaction with the educator – while implying that exposure to the course materials, ideas, and lessons is enough to facilitate learning. The pedagogies that follow this theme are very individualistic, and place a heavy expectation of each individual student to grasp, retain, and utilize course materials by themselves.

This literature review will look at scholarship that examines pedagogical approaches developed by and for the field of e-learning. The articles and studies discussed here will be grouped by theme, with two groups presented in the following sections. The first grouping of academic articles hold to the theme that e-learning is a form of disruptive education that builds

communities in classes that enable learning, while the other grouping of articles run along the theme that e-learning pedagogies are useful in recreating and expanding more traditional models of in-person education in digital spaces.

2. The Presence, or Lack, of Community as Methodology

The different themes outlined in the introduction are informed by my understanding of hooks' pedagogical approach. In order to fully appreciate the review that follows it is important that I present the basic criteria and methodology I used to evaluate the scholarship behind e-learning.

hooks highlights that many students encounter education in a very conservative setting that uses the banking model of education. This model is, "…based on the assumption that memorizing information and regurgitating it represent[s] gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored and used at a later date…" (hooks 5). This model thus forms the first criteria for evaluating the pedagogies present in the field of e-learning, because many of those pedagogies seek to not only recreate the banking model used in traditional classrooms but take it to a level that it has never seen before. In e-learning, such pedagogies as these often seek to increase the access students have to course materials – such as lectures, notes, and so on – while being unable to encourage student interactions.

The second point in my methodology argues that, "As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence" (*Teaching to Transgress* 8). The development of such communities cannot, by itself, guarantee that students will learn or enjoy learning, but the lack of such communities can certainly be detrimental to students. A student who feels isolated from the rest of the class may feel alienated and come to resent coming to

class, learning, or school in general. Pedagogies in the field of e-learning that seek to incorporate the presence of all students often seek to understand how digital technologies may be used to facilitate communication and engagement, monitor how students interact and behave with one another

My own experiences with community learning and the banking model no doubt inform my disposition towards them, as well as my preference for a more community centered classroom environment to learn in. I have been a student for a very long time, and have spent most of my life in classrooms. I have interacted in very small and personal classes – such as the three person Calculus II class in high school – and the impersonal 120 student Psychology class that depended on scantrons to evaluate students' retention of information. My first experience with an online course was in 2012, and I have taken many online classes since then. I believe myself to be qualified to evaluate the pedagogies that inform e-learning, and I believe this review will demonstrate that.

3. E-Learning as Mass Media

The model for MOOCs involves granting free and open access to an unlimited number of students to courses. Advocates argue that this model allows for open access to information across borders. Largely the creation of administrators, MOOCs can trace their history back to 1999, but the model most people are familiar with today was pioneered sometime between 2008

Mike Sharples's "Visions for the Future of Educational Technology" offers a look into what exactly MOOCs are and the pedagogies behind them. In 2012 Sharples served as the Academic Lead for Open University's FutureLearn, which sought to develop its own MOOC modes and pedagogies. In 2015 roughly 250,000 students enrolled in FutureLearn's course "Understanding IELTS." At the time this was the largest enrollment in any MOOC ever.

Sharples asserts that thirty-five percent (35%) of students contributed to discussion boards and argues that such success demonstrates that this model of learning can be used as a basis for open education (153). To an extent, he is not wrong. MOOCs do allow for people to access learning resources that might otherwise be out of the financial reach of many people. However, the pedagogical model these courses depend on is dependent on a lecture approach, and one where the teacher speaks at students and not to them. There is also a question of how engaged students are in discussion posts when 87,500 people are writing discussion posts.

As Rebecca Ferguson points out, MOOCs that use lecture based approaches may incorporate the additional model of "supported distance learning" which uses teams of administrators assistant lecturers to provide large numbers of students in MOOCs more personal engagement and support ("Teaching and Learning at Scales: Futures" 36). There is evidence that such an approach does work well with helping students incorporate into MOOC communities but they are often cost prohibitive for many schools and education systems as each MOOC requires a large number of personnel to teach and support students.

Another issue is community engagement between students is limited in MOOCs, and might appear more akin to cliques in school than something that could be called an actual class-community. Ferguson notes that the biggest logistical hurdle for MOOCs is that very few pedagogies exist that can even attempt to tackle teaching at that scale. One pedagogy that does work is a lecture based approach, but she is quick to emphasize in "Teaching and Learning at Scales: Futures" that students will not get much out of being part of such a large class and that even with distance support learning engagement will be limited.

4. Technology That Enables Community Learning

Starting in the 1980s, computers were introduced into classrooms. There was a great deal of debate regarding exactly what could be accomplished by incorporating computers into classrooms at that time, but two main themes were discussed. First was the issue of integration and time management, and the second was the social impact computers would have on students in classroom settings.

Linnda R. Caporael's "College Students' Computer Use" describes the results of a multi-year study – performed in the early 1980s – that looked at how students' behavior and interactions changed after introducing a computer into the classroom. Caporael notes that students using computers to complete projects were almost always social activities, with the more experienced users helping students who were less proficient (187). What is more, Caporael highlights that students' views about learning were altered through the introduction of computers into courses. Most students described learning exercises as "playing around" or "tinkering," and Caporael notes that trial-and-error and the social transfer of information are two key aspects of digital learning (187). Other articles and studies highlight these effects as well. Colette Daiute points out that computers may serve as social magnets whose presence encourages collaboration and engagement between students ("Issues in Using Computers to Socialize the Writing Process" 41). This is something bell hooks highlights in her work too as transgressive since it upends the traditional banking model of education.

These observations only focus on the presence of computers in the field of e-learning. Yet, simply introducing computers, digital technology, and e-spaces does not guarantee students will use them. It sounds obvious, but Kay Livingston and Rae Condie write that because traditional models of education – even the banking model – depend on students watching,

listening, and mimicking teachers' performance and execution of lessons, the development of digital pedagogies enables students to use computers and online resources to the fullest extent in communal learning ("The Impact of an Online Learning Program on Teaching and Learning Strategies" 154). Developing these models is something that did not just happen independent of the integration of digital technology in the classroom; rather it happened simultaneously as teachers saw the need to adapt their techniques to make the best use of the technology.

W. Ian O'Bryne and Kristine E. Pytash point out six models that can be used to facilitate hybrid learning; they are: face-to-face (F2F) driver, rotation, flex, online lab, self-blend, and online driver ("Hybrid and Blended Learning: Modifying Pedagogy Across Path, Pace, Time, and Place" 138). Many college students have encountered and engaged with such models, usually in the first semester of university. This is just how prevalent hybrid learning has become. It is perhaps the most visible dimension of e-learning because it blends traditional education models with more experimental models.

5. Conclusion

Social observation has always been a major part of the development of e-learning pedagogies, and that will not change. Incorporating computers in classrooms has enabled social learning in ways that many educators from the 1980s did not believe would be possible, and has led to the creation of new pedagogies built around social learning.

However, more recent developments in this field are shifting the focus to massive open online course models at a time when more social learning is needed, not less. That said, I can understand the attraction MOOCs have. They promise free education to an unlimited number of students at a time when more barriers seem to be thrown up that students must overcome. What's

more, the technology is as appealing as the promises because it almost makes the promises believable.

Unfortunately, my observations have led me to believe that disruptive technology frequently reimagines and reengineers the systems it promises to innovate. Already, MOOCs are heavily dependent on lecture style models that lean on banking model pedagogies. The danger of these models has always been that teachers risk talking at their students rather than too and with them. This severely limits the experience students can expect in a classroom. With this in mind I see these models making a resurgence as more policymakers seek to cut spending and move towards MOOCs in order to curb the rise in student absenteeism.

Even so, I do not believe this will be a permanent solution as humans are social creatures and students crave interactions with their classmates. hooks observed that teaching is performative and learning is social. The pedagogical models of e-learning reflect this position, as each attempts to encourage engagement and interaction between students.

Indeed, I do not think I have ever had an online class where a professor has not said, “engaging in class discussions is very important for achieving the learning outcomes of this course.”

I cannot force you to adopt a social pedagogy as part of your teaching method, but I do wish to show you that there is a large overlap between the pedagogical models of e-learning and the pedagogy of social learning. Understanding this link will enable teachers to engage with their students, and allow for a more exciting learning experience that will benefit more people.

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