Suffering quality for quantity:

An analysis of mediated instructional communication.

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The classroom is no longer only found inside four walls. Student-teacher interaction increasingly occurs outside of the classroom (Edwards, Edwards, Qing, & Wahl, 2007; Romano, Lowry, & Roberts, 2007; Sherblom, 2010; Thompson, 2008; Turman & Schrodt, 2005 ). Classes are offered entirely online (Benson, 2003; Lei & Gupta, 2010) or as hybrid courses (a mix of in-class and online courses), and entire degrees are offered online (Bejerano, 2008; Benson, 2003; Lei & Gupta, 2010). This is partially due to nationwide budget constraints. According to Donlevy (2010), “In the current environment, approximately 275,000 school staff are expected to be laid off throughout the United States.” (p. 118). Class sizes are increasing and faculties are expected to do more with less. Therefore, as more classroom activity happens in cyber space, it is important that we, instructional communication scholars, examine the nature of discourse related to (and facilitated by) mediated instructional communication. To that end, I explored various methods of connecting with fellow educators. I joined a listserve and initiated a Facebook page dedicated to Facebook as instruction. I also currently teach a hybrid section of ComS 103, which has provided me with important insight on the topic of electronic media and instruction. In this essay, I detail my exploration of electronic media; next, using relevant Communication theory, I account for my experiences (both good and bad); finally, I offer my own speculation of how I see electronic communication shaping the instructional context in the future.

**Exploration**

In an effort to make sense of how instructors cope with the demand for communicating with students via electronic channels, I first applied for group membership in the Higher Education Teaching and Learning group in Linkedin.com, however my membership was denied. While I was disappointed that the LinkedIn group rejected me, I was pleased to find the Distance Education Online Symposium listserve, which is organized by The Adult Education Program of The College of Education at Pennsylvania State. The list that I participated in concentrated on synchronous vs. asynchronous discussion, Facebook as instruction (my contribution), and questions about developing online courses.

Four years ago, Strom, Grøttum, and Lycke, (2007) claimed, “There has been an increasing interest in the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in problem-based learning. One line of research has been to introduce synchronous, or simultaneous, communication attempting to create text-based digital real-time interaction.” (p. 271). In October, 2011, the conversation continues. A string of communication on the DEOSL listserve titled “Synchronous​ versus Asynchrono​us Discussion” began when a professor at a Midwestern university posed a question addressing this very issue. Dr. Michelle Everson from the University of Minnesota asked the group for suggestions about developing synchronous discussions for an online class. In the posting, Dr. Everson explained that she is hesitant to create synchronous discussion groups for her online course because her students choose the online format to accommodate their busy schedules and they may not even live in the same time zones. Also, she said that she appreciates the benefits of asynchronous discussions, such as the fact that postings in an online course can be read at anytime and reflected on by the student before response is shared (M. Everson, personal communication, October 4, 2011). The post received multiple responses; professors around the country offered advice and shared the same concerns/questions. I thought the responses were helpful, and was inspired to post a question of my own.

I posed a question on the DEOS listserve regarding student-teach interaction on Facebook, and I also received quite a few responses. I asked the group if they “friend” their students on Facebook (why or why not), hoping to use this question as a springboard for more meaningful discussions about mediated instructional communication. I also invited group members to “like” my Facebook page titled “OCD – Out of Classroom Disclosure.” To my surprise, nine professors that I do not know took me up on the invitation and posted feedback on the page. Additionally, the question on the listserve elicited several responses. What I found frustrating, however, was that the responses were less discourse, and more opinion. I wanted to continue the discussion with several of the professors that responded, but they do not seem interested (or available) to discuss further.

Through the listserve and my Facebook page, I explored how instructors cope with (and make sense of) mediated instructional communication. As a GA for a hybrid section of ComS103 (Presentational Speaking in the Organization), I have first-hand experience with mediated communication as instruction. The textbook and lectures for this course are only available online for the hybrid sections (the text is online for all students). Online classes allow learners to collapse time and space (Anderson, 2008), and many tell me the fact that the course is available as a hybrid makes it easier for them to accommodate their work schedules. Offering the course as a hybrid allows the university to offer the class to 600 students, which may be impossible for one professor teaching a traditional class (especially a Public Speaking course, where each students is required to deliver speeches), therefore offering hybrid sections provide a more affordable option for the university. In theory, this is a win-win situation.

Most students in the class actually read the text and download the lectures. I “know” this because I have access to a digital record of each student’s online activity. Each time a student logs on and views a page their activity is recorded. However, the fact that *someone* logs in as a given student and views a page does not guarantee that the student actually read the content, much less created meaning from what he or she read (see Appendix A for a sample student usage log). As the GA, in addition to having the ability to monitor students’ online activity, I conduct lab the section of the course. I answer questions, lead activities to help the students make meaning of the content, and assess the students’ performance. In my observations this semester the students appear to make little connection between the content and the lab, which I think is a weakness of communicating through electronic channels. As previously mentioned, there are over 600 students enrolled in ComS 103, and 20 GA’s. The professor works diligently to help the GAs’s make sense of the course, our responsibilities, and our students’ progress, but in many ways I think we suffer quality for quantity. Suffering quality for quantity seemed to be the theme in the listserve, my Facebook page, and the hybrid section of ComS 103. In the next section, I will attempt to explain why this is the case.

**Explanation**

Thirteen years ago Witmer (1998) warned, “Despite its importance, incorporating CMC into instructional design and teaching it…is not without its challenges, as both students and educators grapple with complex and rapidly changing technology” (p. 162). Since Witmer (1998) made this claim, technology has evolved exponentially (Andresen, 2009) and the use of CMC has been widely researched (Edwards et al, 2007; Romano et al, 2007; Sherblom, 2010; Thompson, 2008; Tu, & Corry, 2003; Turman & Schrodt, 2005; Waldeck, Kearney, & Plax, 2001). Yet the posts on the DEOS-L listserve in recent weeks demonstrated that educators are still searching for ways to help their students make meaning from content delivered and discussed online.

Instructors expressed their desire to create effective online discussions. The listserve discussants agreed that there are benefits to asynchronous discussion, and research confirms this notion. For example, students benefit from time to reflect before responding to prompts and assertions (Angeli, Valanides, & Bonk, 2003; Ng, Cheung, & Hew, 2010). However educators are still searching for a way to create successful asynchronous discussions (Andresen, 2009), and while research is being published on the topic, in practice, meaning-making and critical thinking are still accomplished on a trial and error basis. I noticed that even as an instructor posing a question to other instructors, no real discussion occurred.

Additionally, I did not see evidence of critical thinking on the listserve interactions. Angeli et al (2003) claim, “a critical thinker does not simply assert a point of view, but attempts to reason things out based on well supported judgments and evidence” (p. 32). Most responses were instructors telling others what they think. Perhaps this is a symptom of our tradition of treating students as empty vessels into which we must deposit knowledge (Friere, 1994). Instructors are accustomed to telling, and less familiar with collaborating. Teachers tend to treat students as tabula rasa (Young, 1992) in the classroom, and the behavior spills over to mediated instructional communication. This occurred on my Facebook page. I posed several questions on my page, ranging from “to friend or not to friend” to “are we oppressing some students if we assume they all understand and are willing to participate in social networking?” While I did receive several responses, in every instance, the respondent offered an opinion, and then did not return to the topic. How can instructors encourage or facilitate critical thinking online when we do not model the behavior ourselves when interacting with each other?

Obviously much more thought and planning has gone into the design of the ComS 103 course than my Facebook page or in casual listserve advice gathering. According to Anderson (2008), when designing instructional technology, “(s)trategies should be selected to motivate learners, facilitate deep processing, build the whole person, cater to individual differences, promote meaningful learning, encourage interaction, provide relevant feedback, facilitate contextual learning, and provide support during the learning process”(p.18). The ComS 103 course has been strategically designed in this manner. However, the students still appear to be disconnected with the content. When I administer clicker quizzes (another form of electronic communication in the classroom), about half the students answer the questions correctly. It is only when we have an opportunity to discuss *why* certain answers may be correct that I see evidence that students are connecting with the material. According to Kougl (1997), classroom discussions are students’ “opportunities to think out loud together” (p. 207). Students learn from expressing their thoughts out loud, and then hearing their classmates process the same information. (Kougl, 1997). As Gray (2005) asserts, students learn through interaction with the teacher, the content, and each other. In general, the hybrid section of ComS 103 does not encourage this interaction. The interaction, the quality, is suffered by the university (and the students’) desire for quantity.

Instructors are diligently strategizing and experimenting in an effort to make sense of and design effective mediated instructional communication. The past few decades have seen an explosion of mediated options, and it has been challenging for instructors to stay current. I think the trend will continue. In the final section, I will speculate on the challenges and opportunities that instructors will face related to mediated instructional communication.

**Speculation**

I believe the trend of increased CMC will continue in education. As technology develops, instructors will face new, unforeseen challenges related to mediated instruction. Of course we will also be presented with opportunities, but as we have seen thus far, we began grappling with mediated communication long ago, and technology has consistently outpaced us. Instructors seem most comfortable with the banking method (Freire, 1994) of depositing information into their students. We see evidence of this even in teacher-teacher interaction on listserves (and sadly my Facebook page) that are designed to facilitate discussion, yet seem to result in one person asking a question that receives a series of one-sided answers.

Unfortunately I also think we will continue to face budget crisis and increasing demand for online education. For-profit universities will promise distance learning options to students who have difficulty getting into public colleges. As Beaver (2009) states, “Perhaps the most significant and controversial development in American higher education in the past two decades has been the rise of the for-profit college and university.” (p. 53). The for-profit university is over a $48 billion industry, and rapidly increasing. (Beaver, 2009). Private, for-profit universities offer classes and degrees online to students who otherwise may not have access to an education. My husband took two online courses from the University of Phoenix this summer because they were required pre-requisites for his CSUS Master’s program that he could not get anywhere else. We paid $3,200 for those two classes, and he never met his professors or any of his classmates. His professors tried to facilitate critical thinking in those courses, and he did learn a great deal, but he carried the load all by himself. He had no one to discuss (face-to-face) the content with, and spent most of the summer wondering where he stood in the class.

Budget constraints will continue; therefore the demand for online courses will increase. Technology will continue to advance. Instructors will need to continue to develop strategies and theories to address advancing technology in order to facilitate meaning making. As Anderson and Elloumi (n.d.) assert, “it is the instructional strategy, not the technology, that influences the quality of learning” (p. 16). Therefore it will be imperative for instructors to find ways to improve the quality of interactions, not just the quantity.

Changing technology is only one challenge that instructors face. As it happens, people will always be more complex, more interesting, and more unpredictable than technology. Siemens (2004) claims, “technology has reorganized how we live, how we communicate, and how we learn” (para 1). We have seen evidence of this in the way that classes are structured and how students and teachers interact with each other, and the content. However as long as instructors keep in mind that the goal is to help students think critically and create meaning, the channel of communication may be less important.

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