It's about Time

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Blog Series: Online Teaching, Online Learning
September 25, 2018
Tags: student learning | online teaching | synchronous online education

When you teach online, you get accustomed to classroom teachers telling you they can't imagine not being in the same place at the same time as their students. Usually what they dwell on is not being in the same *place*. They profess difficulty imagining being geographically distant from their students. They question how it's possible to teach without the body language, visual cues, tone of voice, and the like, that the physical proximity of being together in a classroom affords.

Perhaps because I came to online teaching from a background in field education where, by definition, my students left campus to go somewhere else to learn, and in denominational leadership, where leading phone conferences with participants scattered across the country was the norm, I was not overly daunted by the prospect of communicating with people in other places.

What I knew would be challenging is the lag in *time*. I had always relied on the *immediacy* of classroom teaching. There are some people whose thoughts come out of their mouths perfectly formed into sentences whose meaning is crystal clear. I am not one of them. I tend to economize too much with my words, or make leaps of logic in my head, or have to backtrack to fill in context. When people are taking in what I'm saying at the same time as I'm saying it, however, I can compensate. I am pretty good at quickly sensing what I need to clarify. I am most comfortable when teaching is like a dance and I can use my partner's responses in real

time to make it work.

When you teach online, the song can be over by the time you realize that your students never got into the rhythm and have danced a different dance. The hallmark of asynchronous online education is that students are working at different times throughout the week, entering and exiting the class at their own pace and paying you attention on their own time. Their engagement with you and with the material may be just as high as in a classroom, but its timing will be unpredictable. You simply cannot know when a comment or explanation from you will finally reach them. And students experience the same thing, of course, from you. Unless you are willing to log in to the course every hour of every day, their question or confusion might not get addressed right away. Sometimes what happens while you are gone, therefore, is that a misguided thread of discussion can take on a life of its own, a set of odd assumptions can be built up about the reading, or simple errors in the assignment compounded.

What I have learned about communication in online teaching—to switch to a different metaphor—is that it bears similarity to letter writing. You write down your thoughts, hit *Send* and put them into cyberspace, and hope they reach your reader in good time. Then you wait to know whether your words made enough sense and what your correspondent thinks of them. If the correspondence is important, sometimes you find yourself anxiously going to your mailbox over and over again to see whether anything has been delivered back to you yet in the post.

The comparison between online education and letter writing is ironic to say the least. Usually we think that technology serves to speed everything up in our lives. But it is instructive as well.

In the old days of letter writing, we used to take care with what we wrote, and there were conventions that helped us convey meaning. Usually we started with a few references to our correspondent's most recent missive to us, commenting on their news. Then we would hit the highlights of our own, sharing some content and then reflecting on it. We often concluded with questions for the other to answer the next time they wrote, in part to encourage a swift reply.

In online teaching I have learned to take almost excruciating care to frontload what I am trying to teach and to explain ideas and instructions in detail. I try to learn who is in class before it starts so that I can scaffold my teaching upon their experience. I communicate the most important ideas of the course as clearly as I can and follow with some pointed questions to invite them into the discourse. And then I wait and let time do its work.

https://wabash.center/2018/09/its-about-time/