

Educational Embodiment within an Online Graduate Program

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Abstract

This paper outlines a symposium that brings together professors and graduate students from the University of Alberta to address the implications of site visitations on a graduate elearning program within the Faculty of Education. The Master of Education in Educational Studies program is designed for the alternate, flexible delivery of graduate studies at the University of Alberta. The objective of this program is to improve graduate access to a Master of Education program in rural and urban areas of Alberta and to enhance learning via online modalities within the framework of a summer cohort residency, and in conjunction with site visitations to the M.Ed. students' schools and classrooms. The papers within this symposium present the results and implications over a two-year period of this online Master of Education program (2004 to 2006). The findings focus on trust-building in the community-based cohort model, enhancing professional practice and learning via online approaches and empowering University and school collaborations through site visitations as an embodied presence.

Participants

Chair: Jim Parsons, University of Alberta, Faculty of Education
Participants: Maryanne Doherty, University of Alberta; Doris Kieser, University of Alberta
Discussant: Phil McRae, University of Alberta

Purposes

This symposium will inform researchers, practitioners, and administrators about the opportunities and challenges of site visitations within the Master of Educational Studies (MES) Alternative Delivery Program, an online master of education program to improve educational leadership in the province of Alberta. Participants represent the perspectives of faculty and students at the University of Alberta. They present implications for professional practices of elearning in a graduate context. The discussant provides an international perspective on the implications of this approach for graduate elearning.

Educational Importance

The site visitations used to enhance the online learning in this graduate program is a unique approach to achieving a significant educational goal - improved student retention within a graduate program and increased academic performance in an online context. The MES program currently has over 150 graduate students enrolled at the graduate level. These papers have significant implications for other blended elearning graduate programs and the 'traditional' approach to online learning within the post-secondary setting.

Framework

Five years ago the University of Alberta set out to construct a program that would allow the meaningful education of our province's teachers and school leaders. We chose the fundamental concepts of "leadership" and "school improvement" as keystones for our program. We studied what made other graduate programs work, and we copied their best ideas - such as cohort and community-building. We retained many concepts of our traditional graduate programs - such as research and writing. We utilized traditional course structures and outlines but we taught in new ways, shaping them to the online environment and utilizing faculty teams instead of individual instructors. We created teaching assistants whose main job was responding to postings on WebCT and "service" activities of attending so that communication would flow. Then we did "old" things that the online, alternate programs we studied had not done - we retained and even extended the f2f mentorship relationship between graduate students and supervisor.

The MES (Masters of Educational Studies) at the University of Alberta is made up of 10 courses. Two courses are completed in a full-time, initial summer residency held on campus at the University of Alberta. Graduate students then take a classic curriculum theory course, shaped to the on-line environment during their first Fall Term. During their first Winter Term, they take a classic introduction to educational research course, again shaped to the on-line environment. During their second summer residency, again on campus, they prepare research project proposals, draft literature reviews that ground their work, and complete research ethics applications if needed. During their second Fall term, they complete the project under the close supervision of an experienced course instructor; and, during their second Winter term they write a research project report, again under close supervision of experienced course instructors and professional editors. Along with two option courses that they may take from a variety of universities or University of Alberta faculties, this constitutes their program.

Site visits by the Director of the MES program are part of the extension of face-to-face community building that happens during the summer residencies; these are the site visitations of import to this symposium presentation. These visits embellish the elearning community and have concomitant values. Many rural schools - and many rural schools' teachers enroll in the program - have never seen a University of Alberta Faculty of Education professor. The Director's presence in the rural districts of Alberta has put the Faculty of Education in contact with superintendents and personnel from these districts. The data and finding to be discussed in this symposium indicate that stronger partnerships are dramatically being established between the school and the academy within Alberta through these site visitations and the elearning approach used within this program.

Presentations

1. Implications for Master of Education Programs Delivered Online
Maryanne Doherty and Jim Parsons, University of Alberta
Phil McRae, University of Alberta

Abstract

This paper presents the systemic perspective on large-scale reform of graduate elearning programs within the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. It provides results over two years (2004 to 2006) of the Master of Education (MES) alternative delivery program and concludes with implications for others considering supplementing online graduate programs with more embodied practices for the purpose of establishing, enhancing and extending community. See the framework in the introduction for a synopsis of the MES program.

Methods and Data Sources

Three types of analyses were performed to evaluate the overall results: (1) MES Director perspective of the site visitation enhancements, (2) student reflections on the program of study and site visitations, and (3) existing research on effective practice and embodied perspective within elearning graduate programs. Analysis by the Director (Newhart & Parsons, 2006), students and faculty within the program is also provided.

Conclusions and Implications

Graduate education has traditionally been based on a simple premise: a graduate student would be matched with a supervisor, who would work closely with that student as he or she moved from novice, to candidate, through the final orals that capped the graduate student's career. And, with some exceptions, the basic process remained similar - save for depth - between MEd and PhD students. The relationship thus built, if the process worked well, was not so different from a mentorship or apprenticeship that has been around since the ages of blacksmithing or undertaking - simply different in sort. During this relationship, the profession was embraced and the skills and attitudes of that profession were passed from generation to generation. The process was not complex. It was built upon an acceptance and attention to experience, to learned knowledge and skills acquisition. Within this relationship a series of tasks were performed, guided by the sagacious practical wisdom of the more experienced sensei who, again if the process worked, did not require a photocopy but pushed the student past where things were to a place where things could be -based upon the unique interests, talents, and skills of the novice.

Enter technology. Now, combine powerful elearning technologies with changing work realities for teachers and schools, and we have a relatively new 'elearning' platform for 'online' education. That distance graduate programs have emerged as options for novices who seek learning opportunities or job status growth is nothing short of genius; it was an amazingly agile thought to utilize technology to mediate distance and increase opportunities. But it was a thought with attendant difficulties.

How could traditional programs be morphed to an on-line, distance curriculum? How could the high standards we desire and require for graduate education be duplicated in a new environment (Buck, 2001)? How could we create such an opportunity in practical ways - what would it look like, what would people do, where would they sit, how would we communicate and answer questions (Edelstein & Edwards, 2002)? And, finally, how could we hope to replicate relationships that had been so much a part of our tradition of graduate education (Palloff & Pratt,

2000; Brown, 2001)? These questions, if we care, both haunt us and energize us as universities who have undertaken the responsibility of graduate education.

Obviously, other educational institutions "suffer" similar issues. Allen and Seaman (2003) studied online education in the United States and reported that over 1.6 million students are online students and more than 1/2 a million took all their courses online. For some institutions, the reason is money - online courses can be a 'cash cow' to deliver education to paying customers without expensive buildings or parking spaces (Brown & Green, 2003). But, our program is far from a cash cow. Retaining a face-to-face relationship with graduate students spread over the expanse of Alberta has been an act of will and a commitment of funding. If Alberta is a prairie province of straight highways between small communities, navigating that infrastructure means driving to small communities. So, we drive; and sometimes fly. We visit graduate students in our program at their schools, if they are teachers or administrators, or within their districts, if they are district leaders. The essence of the site visitation component of our 'alternative delivery' program is to embrace an embodied presence in schools, regardless of the location of that school within Alberta. And, we do this at least one time per year for most. If we drive by a rural community on the way to another rural community, we stop. We work to be present in a face-to-face way with our students.

The results of the site visitation component to an elearning program is both surprising and powerful - surprising for school jurisdictions, the academy and its flexible delivery of graduate programs and enhancing leadership capacity in a province composed of many rural communities. One school district superintendent summarized the success of the MES program "the Director goes to schools."

2. Implications of Master of Education Program Site Visitations on the Corpus

Doris Kieser, University of Alberta

Abstract

The important discussion in the account of site visitations within a blended e-learning program is the face-to-face aspect of students' learning experiences. A looming issue in the proliferation of learning technologies and their increasing presence in all sorts of learning environments has to do with the body. While acknowledging the benefits technologies and distance education offers to people who might otherwise be unable to access information, knowledge, and learning, still there remains a physical disconnection from the community in which learners participate. Yes, virtual/real online communities do exist, but they fail to address the value of physical interaction and bodily presence in their realities.

Methods and Data Sources

A qualitative approach in the hermeneutic tradition, as well as interviews and evaluations, were performed to evaluate the overall results of the site visitations to the MES program.

Conclusions and Implications

The embodied, physically present component of a blended e-learning environment benefits the creation of a learning community. If this were not true, proponents of online learning would spend less time suggesting how the lack of f2f interaction can be re-created by online bulletin boards, video conferences, or listservs (Blake, 2000). That the lack of physical presence is problematic has been cited by many (Muirhead, 2000; Bower, 2001) who highlight teachers' perplexities with building relationships online in a space challenged by a lack of "direct" interpersonal contact that helps, for one thing, to gauge communication clarity. Some even register complaints about poor course evaluations (Schott et al., 2003) or the ability to encourage students to be self-directed, disciplined, and self-motivated. Each of these maladies springs from a lack of community responsibility so naturally engendered by personal proximity and its attendant communal aspects.

To eliminate the corpus is to revert to a Cartesian mind-body dualism that is content to value the intellectual, the cogito of our sum, over the affective and somatic. This seems to lose, once again, the meaning of our physical presence to one another. It says that, at the end of the day, what one thinks is all of what one is, because that is all we need to know. Of course, for anyone who has witnessed a student yawning voraciously in the middle of class, they will know that this student's physical presence is commenting on any number of variables that impact upon his/her learning (e.g., this class is boring, or school certainly interferes with my social life, or my child was up all night vomiting and feverish, etc.).

Over the two thousand years of Christian history, it has had its bleak moments with regard to the body. It has been variously disparaging (the body is inherently obstructive to salvation) and ambivalent (the body is good concerning reproduction but is bad concerning sexuality) about the body (particularly the female body). It is rather recent that it has begun more consistently to consider the body to be inherently good as a result of God's willingness to take on human form. If it is good enough for God, it must be good enough for humanity. Indeed, our bodies are how we move to God.

There are, therefore, ethical implications of the incarnation regarding how we treat our bodies both individually and collectively. There was a reason Jesus associated with prostitutes and lepers, and it likely had nothing to do with ensuring that they saw his power point presentation on redemption. Physical presence changes things. It creates vulnerabilities of relationship that technology can neither mediate nor facilitate. It nudges us closer to an authentic self-representation in and to the world. It asks us to be accountable for our words and actions. (For example, there are no virtual prisons for people guilty of technological crimes, like collecting or selling child pornography online. Nothing short of bodily accountability and presence in the criminal justice system will suffice.) Our bodies are ourselves in community.

When speaking of learning communities, it is likely that physical proximity contributes something (whether positive or negative) to the dynamic of human interaction. We see people eye-to-eye, we sense them, smell, hear, and possibly even touch them. We are verbal and visual with them: we are bodies among bodies. We cannot dismiss the reality of

the other person in our midst. Whether we are tentative, boisterous, or even obnoxious, visceral, bodily reactions occur.

Interestingly, recent post-structuralist philosophies are moving in a different direction regarding the body. Theorists tend towards the conflation of sex and gender in such a way as to posit the social construction not only of gender, but also of sex. The body is thus discursively constructed. This paper is critical of such a perspective, not because the theory ill-conceived or frivolous, but rather, because bringing the theory to practice means that the body, as a body, means nothing.

There is indeed something compelling about saying that the body itself is worked upon in its own creation and our interpretation of its meaning. Surely our experiences and perceptions do contribute to personal bodily meaning. But what of the essential meaning of bodily difference in general? There is something inherent about bodies as sexed (or any other difference) that, without immersing ourselves wholly in gender and other social roles, means something about how we are in the world.

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Implications of Embodied Site Visitations to an Online Graduate Studies
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1