Philosophy of Online Education

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Online education and face-to-face education are not so different. Or, more accurately, when facilitated properly, they have the potential to achieve the same outcomes. They are very different. Any educational philosophy that works for face-to-face teaching should work equally as well for online education. Online and digital education is, with some very strange exceptions into which I will not dive here, some conglomeration between traditional correspondence, traditional face-to-face education, and some accelerated form of library auto-didacticism. As such, an enormous amount of planning is required in the development of an online course, but the instructor must always be willing to change course on a dime, as it is the instructor who plans and architects the course, but the students who execute and live within it.

Education in the United States is a strange and admittedly difficult to reconcile set of ideas, some of which at first seem exclusive of each other. Acknowledging its datedness, I am an adherent to the progressive movement of education. Some of what is lacking in progressivism can, I believe, be made up for with its newer cousin, the connectivist movement. I believe education, even at the individual course level, should focus on problem solving, developing social skills, and emphasizing the importance of lifelong learning (Cremin, 1964). These are foundational elements of the progressive movement. I also believe that digital education provides students with a uniquely high number of potential learning paths, and that knowing how to undertake the act of self-learning is arguably more valuable than learning in and of itself (Siemens, 2005). Online education, then, presents students with a unique opportunity to explore their own learning with a level of autonomy not necessarily present in most face-to-face classes. By structuring a course in ways that encourage (or require) student choice, students can not only learn what they are more interested in learning, but they also have an opportunity to practice existing and develop new research and learning skills which will be invaluable as their education continues.

All that said, obviously one of the major factors in online education that I believe is important is structure. That may sound paradoxical as I talk about student choice and skill development outside of the course, but I believe it is not. Structure encourages positive social behavior, of course, but it does much more than that as well. Through the creation of an online cohort that engages in exploration, integrates their various educational paths, and allows for group discourse, I believe that the structure of a course can facilitate student learning just as well as the materials chosen (Swan, Garrison, & Richardson, 2009). Face-to-face education should be designed with opportunities for students to divulge themselves into their own interests and then, over a period of time, reconvene with the class on those interests and see how they mesh with what other students have learned. Having students engage in, for example, long group activities that require them to connect the dots between cultures, interests, and disciplines is one of the most effective tools that any teacher has at their disposal (Burke, 2008). As I am an English teacher, I am focused significantly more on skill development than content knowledge. Education should be focused on not only bringing out skills that students already have but also about encouraging the development of new skills, and there are few ways to do that better than having students develop their own skills and share them with new students. Students at all levels are naturally capable of extraordinary things, even if they and their teachers do not realize it.

One of the greatest things about online learning is that, by its very nature, it is not beholden to the same strict schedule and locality issues that face-to-face learning is (Ally, 2008). The greatest difference between online education and face-to-face education is in the time constraints. Students can demonstrate their knowledge and understanding in any number of ways; I just have to be able to give them choices. Group work, choice projects, research topics, student-generated discussions and even student-generated essay questions – all of these are ways to let students use their background and interests to shape the curriculum. All of these work equally well in face-to-face and online education. With online education, there is an opportunity to encourage greater outside growth than is possible in the span of the 4-5 classroom hours you might normally get per week. There is space for reflection, student interaction and design, rewriting, and personal experiences that are not necessarily there in classrooms. Reflection is one of the most significant aspects of effective learning that online education can facilitate (Fink, 2013). Face-to-face education exists linearly along a straight line, but online education can reflect, loop in on itself, connect dots through hyperlinks, and encourage growth in a free, non-linear way. As such, I believe learning best takes place when it is cyclical, and English especially needs to be reflected on and analyze by outside parties (Lorber & Pierce, 1990). Without reflection, analyzation and cohort / teacher interaction, there may be learning, but to what end?

Education is simultaneously a means to an end and an end in itself. All course design should reflect this. Students should have the opportunities to explore tools and information that is interesting to them. They should also have the opportunity to explore and interact with other students, learning from them. How I design those opportunities is obviously up to me, but I think students need to be prepared to become life-long learners, just as Dewey proposed around a century ago. Online education, by nature of its existing in a space that has come to dominate our lives, offers students heretofore unseen opportunities for learning and growth. However, that does not mean that the role of the teacher, as facilitator and guide, has radically changed as well. Opportunities, feedback, guidance and good old honesty still make up the backbone of education, and likely will for a long, long time.

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