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AUTHOR   Kennedy, Cathleen A.
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ABSTRACT
                This paper presents a new educational paradigm for online
education from the perspective of a faculty member who has taught these
classes. It also addresses the value of the social context of the audience
when looking into the differences between traditional and distance learners.
The article cites one study that found that, as compared with traditional
students, telecourse students are more intelligent, more emotionally stable,
more trusting, and more conforming. They also tend to be more self-sufficient
and expedient. The paper challenges assumptions about distance learning
students in the online environment, asking if students who take courses
online are already motivated, capable, and familiar with the technologies. If
online education is viewed as an extension of what has been done before,
there is a risk of building in certain assumptions about the teacher-student
model and student learning strategies. How can online education be reinvented
from a social context? What needs to be done? First, identify the educational
purpose, asking who the institution seeks to serve and to what end. Once an
audience is chosen, a community of learners who have reason to study a
particular discipline online can be developed. The needs of the community
must precede the pedagogy. Finally, the requirements of technology must be
considered in terms of how to meet these objectives. (Contains 11
references.) (VWC)

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Reinventing Online Education From A Social Context

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a talk by Cathleen Kennedy at the "Online Education in California

Community Colleges: Faculty Perspectives" Conference at College

of San Mateo

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I'm one of those people who sees the trees long before I become aware

of the forest, and this is exactly what happened in my thinking about

online education. I started by considering the ways technology permitted

interactive communication independent of time and place, and I looked for

parallels to my existing modes of communicating with my students. For

example, I saw using email as parallel to using the telephone in my office,

and I saw online conferencing as parallel to my posing questions to

students during class time to generate group discussion. Using these

technologies, I then tried to replicate what I did in the classroom in an

online format. I had a strong sense that the classroom environment is

highly dependent on the personality and style of the teacher, and I tried to

make my web presence very personal. I felt that students needed to know

that they had a real teacher who cared about their success.

Despite the positive feedback I received from most of my first online

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students, I had nagging doubts about how comparable the online experience could ever be to a regular face-to-face classroom experience. My concern ultimately centered on the plight of the less well-prepared students. These are students who I can identify and help in a classroom environment, but who I cannot detect as easily and help as well online. I was left wondering whether online education was only appropriate for mature students who were already academically well-prepared.

As I struggled with that question, I came to realize that as long as my thinking about online education remained grounded in past practice and current technologies, I would never be able to visualize a new educational paradigm. Instead of starting with the trees, I needed to start with the forest.

My assumptions about what was needed in an online course were my trees: the parallel modes of communication, the need for extensive personal interactions, and the value of group activities. When I did some research into the differences between traditional and distance learners, I realized the value of the forest, or the social context of the audience. One study included 450 students at a state university (Biner et al, 1995). The study was conducted, in part, to determine if the personality traits of telecourse students differed from those of on-campus students. The findings suggest that, as compared with traditional students, telecourse

students are: more intelligent, more emotionally stable, more trusting, and more conforming. They also tend to be more self-sufficient than group-oriented, and more expedient than conscientious.

A second study, this one looking at persistence among 400 distance learners in a professional program (Fjortoft, 1996) found that perceived intrinsic benefits of obtaining a degree, such as learning to perform their job better or access to recent developments in the discipline, was a good predictor of persistence, while perceived extrinsic benefits such as career mobility and salary were not good predictors. A surprising finding was that students with higher levels of "comfort with learning" were less likely to persist in the program. Does this imply that the most capable independent learners will take what they need from an online course and then stop participating?

Without going into the details of the validity and generalizability of the findings of these studies, our intuition tells us that distance students are different from on-campus students. The issue is whether we use that knowledge to design courses and student supports appropriate to the audience; or, do we simply replicate online what's done in the classroom? These studies suggest that some of my assumptions about what online students need may have been wrong. For example, based on my experience in the classroom, I thought students would benefit from group

interaction. It turns out that online students may be so expedient and self-sufficient that requiring group work creates an obstacle to their progress rather than a source of support.

Several questions emerge about student characteristics. How are online students different from on-campus students and what does this imply about our choice in pedagogy? Should we expect the profile of online students to change over time, as online courses become more widely available to a more heterogeneous and technically experienced audience? Will they be different from one discipline to another; from one level to another? What is the role of motivation and how does it interact with personality and learning styles for online students? Are the predictors for success or persistence the same for online students as for students enrolled in other types of distance learning?

We need to challenge our assumptions about distance learning students in the online environment. For example, I'm sure many of you have heard of the "No significant difference" phenomenon in technology-based distance learning (Russell, 1999); the general finding is that students perform as well in distance environments as in traditional classrooms. While many of the over 300 studies contributing to this finding do not meet scholarly experimental standards (Phipps, 1999), a common explanation for online students performing so well is that they are a select

group. We might assume that students who chose to take courses online are already motivated, capable and familiar with the technologies; but are they?

A significant number of my online students in the past few semesters did not really chose the online format. It was the only section of the course with available space. Should I tell these students that they don't fit the "success" profile and encourage them to wait a semester or take a similar course on campus at another institution? Or, should I make an effort to find ways to make the online environment meet the needs of these students? Unfortunately, I don't believe that educational need is driving technological development today.

Some suggest that online education is a natural, and perhaps expected, outcome of technological change, and indeed, the methods we use online today wouldn't have been possible 5, or even 2, years ago. I think many of us are intrigued by the possibilities of using technology to do something we've wanted to do all along, and that is to make education more accessible. Unfortunately, greater physical accessibility does not necessarily lead to greater democratization of education, or improved economic or social mobility for our students. In fact, many of us would point to technology, and especially online education, as potentially worsening the chasm between the advantaged and the disenfranchised

not only here at home, but across the globe.

In 1997, 94% of Americans had telephones, 37% had personal computers, and 19% had Internet access. In the three years from 1994 to 1997, email access grew by nearly 400% (McConnaughey, 1997). And this access grew in the places you would expect: white households across all income levels were twice as likely to own computers and three times as likely to have Internet access as non-white households.

Does this mean we should abandon thinking about online learning as a route to greater democratization of education? Not necessarily. Instead, it's a reminder that we need to think differently about our audience. Who do we wish to serve, and how is this community of learners different from the community that is connected through a correspondence course, the community that comes together around a telecourse, and the community we find in today's college classrooms. What are the economic and social obstacles to higher education, and how might we deal with them?

While it's tempting to use familiar constructs to envision the future, it's also dangerous in that it can limit our expectations. If we look at online education as an extension of what we've done before, we risk building in certain assumptions about the teacher-student model and student learning strategies.

As an example, what if we suggest that online learning is an extension of

learning via television. Online students sitting at their computers browsing the web with a mouse become analogous to passive television viewers clicking the remote control. Instantly, many of us conjure up visions of couch-potato students: isolated, lethargic, and dulled. Our image of the teachers isn't much better: sitting at home in jammies having coffee for an hour at the end of the semester hurriedly assigning course grades based on machine-graded midterm and final exams. Negligible teacher-student interaction. Zero student-student interaction. Having been a telecourse teacher for several years in an environment where it could not be considered part of my regular teaching load, and where my pay rate was lower than the standard lecture or laboratory rate, I believe there are individuals who do see telecourses from this perspective.

How about online learning as an extension of correspondence courses? Can you visualize any parallels? Perhaps you see online students using the computer like the postal and telephone systems; a means for receiving instructions, submitting assignments and examinations, and occasionally communicating with an instructor when questions arise. This image is somewhat appealing from the standpoint that it lifts education out of the lockstep, factory model governed by bells, minutes, and conformity; but it lacks any synergy derived from teachers and students being on the same wavelength at the same time.

On the other hand, what if I had suggested instead that online learning is actually an extension of the model of cohorts of early university students and Masters organized around specific disciplines. In this analogy, today's students searching the web for information are likened to early university students who spent much of their time ensconced in libraries. In this analogy, we see the professor functioning as a guide or mentor to a small group of students. Quite a different image of online education.

I wanted to use these three examples to demonstrate how biases and assumptions are hard to eliminate when we think of online education as an extension of something we already know (Agre, 1998). It's one the reasons why we need to start from the vision of the forest instead of from the perspective of one or two familiar trees.

We must question our embedded social assumptions about what is good and proper in the classroom, and the way things "should be done." For example, we assume that face-to-face communication is the "ideal." For whom? Under what circumstances? Is it ideal for students who must take a course online or not at all? Perhaps we will find that face-to-face contact is not the ideal for certain types of learners, just as I discovered that group work isn't helpful to some of my online students.

We traditional educators can't seem to escape the concept that education is social and that personal interaction is best; but is this true for today's

adult learners? How much of what we do in the classroom today is based on what we've discovered about how young people learn and may not be translatable to effective strategies for busy working adults?

We've been experimenting with online education for the past five years or so, and will probably continue to experiment for at least another decade. Few of us can imagine the magnitude of the changes that are likely to take place over the next twenty or thirty years as global access to the Internet, or its descendant medium, becomes ubiquitous.

If we look to the past for guidance, we note that early users of the printing press couldn't imagine a use more creative than translating the physical process of copying existing manuscripts by hand to copying existing manuscripts with a printing press. But what actually happened as books became more widely available? Literacy increased.

What about the introduction of computers in the workplace in the 60's? Initially they were intended to automate, or translate, the physical processes associated with record keeping. At that time, very few people imagined today's scenario with computers not only on desktops and in briefcases, but also in homes and elementary schools. We didn't imagine that the computer would be used like a telephone, like a library, or like a store, or that children would be able to program them.

The introduction of new technology marks the beginning of a chain of events that result in social transformations (Agree, 1997; Jones, 1998; Kling, 1996; Kraut, 1998; Rochlin, 1997). As we think about the new community of teachers and learners that is evolving in the online education paradigm, we should keep in mind the complexity and interactions of the many other social changes going on. We must consider how the impact of technological change on individuals can be ameliorated or exacerbated by changes in the family, in the workplace, and in society at large.

So, how do we start reinventing online education from a social context? What needs to be done?

First, what is your educational purpose? Note that I didn't ask, Why do you want to offer online courses. I'm asking who does your institution seek to serve and to what end? For example, is it your purpose to promote democratic equality, preparing students to be competent citizens; economic efficiency, training students to meet the needs of the workplace; or social mobility, empowering students to advance within the social structure? Obviously, that's a huge question that will be debated for a long time; but as you think about online education and the role it plays at your institution, you need to have some sense of purpose because that shapes your perception of your current and potential audience.

Once you have an audience in mind, you can begin to envision a community of learners who have reason to study a particular discipline online. How might we define such a community? What are the shared needs or intentional common interests? Are there other significant unintentional commonalities to be considered? How do the community members perceive their relationship to one another?

When we understand the needs of the community we can think about pedagogy. What is the role of collective knowledge within the community; must there be a leader or can it be a network of equal contributors? What teaching and learning strategies will be appropriate and what other kinds of support should be provided?

Finally, we need to think about the requirements we have of technology to meet these objectives. Will current technologies suffice or must new technologies be devised to meet our purposes?

As you participate in the conference workshops today, I encourage you to think broadly about educational goals from a social context. And then, to think of online education as a means to change lives.

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