Engaging Affectively Effectively in Spaces of Online Learning

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Opportunities for online learning have become an increasingly prominent feature of higher education over the last few decades, but no one could have anticipated the sudden, urgent necessity of virtual education due to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. All of a sudden, universities across the country had to shift the majority of their classes and research activities to fully virtual formats. This move, while ultimately the safest decision, was met with much resistance. In a lawsuit demanding tuition refunds, University of San Diego students argued that the remote online learning put in place due to the pandemic "cannot provide the same value as in-person education"; this is merely one of many legal attacks against online education directed at universities across the country. While admittedly this accusation may be true of the frantic shift to online classes at the beginning of the outbreak in Spring 2020, institutions of higher education have invested in better quality tools and training for faculty and staff to prepare to move fully online for the 2020-2021 academic year. Colleges and universities have attempted to create engaging digital online classes, but despite many innovations the complaints that forays in virtual learning are not of "the same value" to students persist even when the same content is presented. So, what's the problem? If the issue is not the worth of the content itself, and the same instructors are teaching it, the breaking point must be somewhere in the content's transmission and delivery in a course's digital iterations. I argue that the recent massive shift to online learning has disrupted the affective entanglements that are fostered in physical spaces and the important connections made between students and their instructors and peers. I believe that consciously incorporating methods from feminist and postcolonial digital humanities pedagogy into online

learning as a whole will lead to more authentic affective engagement and increase learner satisfaction.

The affect generated in the classroom influences the effectiveness of student learning. In their 2020 book *Mapping the Affective Turn in Education: Theory, Research and Pedagogies,* editors Bessie P. Dernikos et al. coin the term "affective scratchings" to refer specifically to the phenomenon of affect in learning, highlighting the Deleuzian prioritizing of sensation over logic. In their introduction to the volume, they argue:

> ...we use *scratch* to help us remember affect's promising possibilities--its capacity to tear open new worlds in stuck moments--but also to remind us of its threats, mobilities, and fizzles. We are living in uncertain times--moments where bodies, spaces, and things are continually disciplined, managed, marginalized, and even violently erased; when disorientation opens im/possibilities; and when confidence in conventional action falters.
> (Dernikos et. al 10)

This definition not only highlights the presence of affect in the classroom, but also acknowledges the risks that accompany it. Indeed, recent massive moves to online learning undoubtedly fit the bill of "disorientation," but have instructors truly seized the associated affective "im/possibilities" in developing their virtual classrooms?

In her 2015 essay "Feminist Politics of Emotions and Critical Digital Pedagogies: A Call to Action," Megan Boler analyzes the ways in which a neglect of rigorous and deliberate engagement with affect in the classroom can negatively impact student learning, in particular pointing to the current lack of successful mediation of affect in online education. She posits that pedagogical technologies have yet to find a way to replicate the same kind of embodiment in the virtual learning space that are needed for affective connections; the learning environment is

sterilized, and there is no room for the mess affiliated with emotion. Feminist pedagogies may help to create a foundation for incorporating affect into online learning; turning to feminist pedagogical principles such as engaging with difference, facing discomfort, and recognizing that the personal is inextricably linked to the political can help students learn that emotion is a valid source of knowledge.

Whether we acknowledge emotions as flowing through our classrooms or not, there is no doubt that the perceived lack of value in online classes is referring to an enmeshed affective/emotional/feeling response that students are accustomed to in physical educational environments. Something about online learning seems to stunt affective engagement. Higher education's attempt at affective engagement online is in crisis, and part of this comes down to instructor performances of authority; in both the physical and digital classroom, teachers are constantly attempting to effectively engage students with the course material. Despite content perhaps being delivered in essentially the same way--for instance, a lecture delivered in a large hall, via a Zoom call, or a recording--there are discrepancies in the level of success in in-person versus virtual teaching. The primary difference seems to be the interruption of interaction between student and instructor, as well as among the students themselves; learning risks becoming an isolated, solitary activity that is ultimately less engaging and generative.

To ethically confront the risks of affective engagement and networking, instructors must be transparent with students and incorporate lessons on the production and practices of their online learning and presence into the coursework. Roopika Risam presents a combination of postcolonial and digital humanities pedagogies as a potential solution to this issue:

...students are encouraged to develop new ideas about inequalities in knowledge

production, communicate them to their peers, and intervene in them through their online

practices. They are asked to consider how digital spaces can both facilitate and foreclose diverse perspectives and to engage these ideas iteratively, through experimentation and play….Together, students gain an understanding of the ways digital spaces privilege particular communities and forms of knowledge. (Risam 92)

Only by directly engaging with ideas and theories around digital spaces themselves can students fully understand and knowingly engage in these spaces, and this then allows them to engage affectively and safely in these environments.

While instructors may be limited to certain platforms for online learning, students can still participate in discussion about what surveillance looks like in digital spaces and with what purpose these platforms are built for from the university (as the actual platform client) perspective; however, the digital materials and resources incorporated for content delivery can provide an opportunity to walk students through ethical digital spaces and provide points of analysis for students to apply theoretical frameworks. Risam provides a variety of examples of various ways students can learn about knowledge production and "intervening in the digital cultural record," ranging from editing Wikipedia to remixing existing digital media (89). In one example of an exercise that could span across many disciplines, students might interact with a digital archive through their coursework. As they peruse the website, they might identify ways in which the materials either contribute to or work against the ethical use of digital space. Who can access these materials, and who can contribute to collections? Does the contextualization of the materials include the voices of the communities they are from? What information is collected about users? Although students, and even instructors, are most likely unable to directly access all of this information in an online learning environment or make changes, they can begin to understand the constructions of digital space and who benefits from the way these spaces are

designed. Together, they can critically and affectively contribute to and even challenge the online environments they inhabit both inside and outside of their educational institution.

It appears that in the online classroom, the teacher's role as a curator of affect is de-emphasized as students are given more opportunities to direct their own learning. There is nothing inherently wrong with students taking more responsibility in their own education, but it does to some extent prevent the creation of an affective environment if students are left to their own devices. In her examination of the role of teacher as authority in the classroom--and thus responsible for the associated affective atmospheres--Megan Watkins emphasizes the importance of the instructor in cultivating particular affects to stimulate learning:

> ...pedagogy plays an important role in the accumulation of affects that can generate a desire to learn...Giving emphasis to learning over teaching de-emphasizes the teacher's role and the potentially powerful ways in which recognition and interaffectivity can augment the pedagogic process. While power may be ever present, it provides the means through which agency is achieved. (284)

Students gain agency in their work by experiencing their instructor's leadership; even with a shift to learner-led activities, teachers still must shoulder the responsibility of encouraging affective engagement through their teaching. Students will learn the best ways to interact with and in digital environments from their instructors, who must devise and implement the affects they want to imbue their classrooms to encourage learning as much as any other part of their lesson plan. Teachers should model the ways they expect knowledge to be produced and privileged in their online spaces, and the way they handle the trial and error of navigating digital environments will set an example for how students will forge relationships with virtual education. Left unchecked,

the affective scratchings in a classroom--online or otherwise--may interfere with the learning process.

Irrespective of the instructor's careful development of an affective atmosphere, whatever platform chosen to serve as the conduit for affective networks also presents a risk. Ethically, how do we ask our students to share their affects/emotions/feelings in spaces even more prone to surveillance than the traditional university classroom? In "The Platformization of the Classroom: Teachers as Surveillant Consumers," Kumar et al. determine that learning platforms are at risk of providing teachers more opportunity to monitor students and reducing the relationship through the datafication of students. They write:

> ...the use of technology platforms also flatten students, representing them as one-dimensional units within a uniform interface...by foregrounding student data and representing students uniformly... platforms may entice teachers to equate their practical omniscience with knowledge of their students, collapsing the categories of student data and student. (Kumar et. al 151)

Although this may apply to some platforms more than others, the way online educational platforms are designed intrinsically to decrease the potentiality for affective engagement. By reducing students to their statistics, these platforms lower the potential points of contact for developing affective networks. Student identity becomes embodied by a number, and students are pushed into producing certain data points rather participating authentically and affectively. In the past year it has become more standard for data privacy statements to be incorporated into course syllabi, but discussions with students about the way they are represented in and interact with learning management systems can help shape the way they engage within this space in a way in which they are more fully in control of their digital presence.

If the instructor is responsible for the curation of affect in spaces of learning, how is this cultivation mediated differently in digital space? When teachers and students are not in the same place and affect cannot move between bodies and objects in the traditional sense, how can it still be incorporated into the pedagogic process? I feel that Wetherell et al. perfectly capture the way the same kinds of affective atmospheres can develop within the classroom: "affect acts as a kind of extra-discursive excess mysteriously imbuing spaces and places--they acquire an atmosphere and affecting powers--which are then assumed to automatically organise and change those who pass through this space" (4). However, this clearly applies to the ability to physically locate in a place or space--in the digital sphere, one cannot "pass through" a space as much as log on and linger. Technology users have instead brought affect into the space with them, and it saturates the networks of connection rather than the spaces themselves. As Oliver Leistert points out in his analysis of how organizing protest has changed in its move from physical public spaces to online, affect continues to exist and successfully bring people together: "in the paradigm of digital connectivity, affect seems to have abandoned the necessity of physically-bodily co-presence" (138). This is evidenced by the affective networks created through social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, but these networks are actively cultivated by the user as they select friends and followers (although, these networks are prone to algorithmic influence which potentially limit those included). The online classroom cannot be managed by the user in the same way as the user is not asked to develop their own network, but placed into one determined by who is also in the course. In terms of the educational technology itself, there are many kinds of digital spaces, so there are a variety of options for online teaching and networking connections; however, these options may be limited due to university mandated learning management software, or constraints such as instructor or student comfort with various

technologies, or even public perceptions of certain software and websites over others. Therefore, the instructor's role as curator of affect is highlighted by the structured inability to organically grow affective networks among students and empowering them by developing opportunities for the intermingling of content and delivery to more fully inform student learning.

Until higher education can consistently work within the framework feminist and postcolonial digital humanities methods to provide safe virtual classrooms that ethically engage in a politics of emotion, the affective scratchings of learning will remain elusive and students and instructors will continue to feel unsatisfied while online. The onus is on the instructor as curator of affect to incorporate elements into their pedagogy that ask students to consciously challenge and attempt to remap spaces of online learning. By encouraging students to be direct contributors to online spaces, these spaces can then be shaped by the interactions and productions that occur within them.

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