

Cyborg Teaching: The Transferable Benefits of Teaching Online for the Face-to-Face Classroom

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Abstract

Critics of online education often assume that traditional classrooms offer the most meaningful form of learning. Some instructors equate physical presence with intimacy, engagement, and effectiveness, though others like myself have discovered that presence and engagement are equally available in an online setting. It is time to reassess what counts as “effective” learning and consider how online education and online technologies can enhance rather than diminish student learning. This development in my own thinking as a once firm believer in the face-to-face classroom came from a one-year experience of developing and teaching my full-time course load from a distance. In addition to discovering new possibilities in online teaching, I found that best practices applied in the online classroom can be transferred to the face-to-face classroom to enhance student learning in any environment. For example, online discussion boards, consistent e-communications, course content videos, and online conferencing are tools that can be implemented into the face-to-face classroom—merging the benefits of embodied presence with the less limited boundaries of technology. When guided by a pedagogical focus on creating effective student learning, online technologies offer higher education a meaningful way to meet the needs and expectations of 21st century learners.

Keywords: online education; online learning; student engagement; online composition

Introduction

E.M. Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops” (1909/1988) was published long before social networks, video conferencing, and online education, but it explores the consequences of how such technologies would leave society emotionally and socially disengaged, and so dependent on technology that people are unable to detect and forestall their own destruction. Much like the space colony in Disney’s popular animated film *Wall-E* (2008), where people are shuttled around in floating chairs as their bodies atrophy, each person in “The Machine Stops” spends his or her life in a mechanical chair in a hexagonal cell. The body becomes “a swaddled lump of flesh” from lack of movement and the face turns “as white as a fungus” from lack of sunlight, since civilization now lives entirely underground and controlled by the ubiquitous and revered “Machine” (p. 41). Though isolated in their individual cells, people are connected to thousands of others via screens that feed them images and audio, and the main source of passing the time is giving and listening to lectures about a world no one actually sees or experiences firsthand. When someone needs privacy or solitude, he or she simply “logs of” by touching an isolation button.

The story centers on Vashti and her son Kuno, who represent two different reactions to Machine life. Vashti is entirely dependent on the Machine and fears being outside of her room and unable to access her thousands of “friends,” while Kuno longs to reconnect with his body and with intimate, face-to-face connections with others. When Vashti begrudgingly visits her son in response to his persistent requests, she is terrified by the possibility of real in-the-flesh human contact, and she is completely indifferent to looking at a world she believes offers no real ideas. Her understanding of the world, her experience of the presence of others, and her ability to share and create meaning is constantly mediated by technology;

bodies unnerve her, as does her own. Kuno determinedly develops his physical strength--even using a pillow as resistance--and then explores the world above ground as he looks for alternatives to machine life. Vashti is meant to repel us with her bulbous flesh, deathly white appearance, and close-minded attitude. In contrast, Forester's hero Kuno is meant to appeal to us with his natural athleticism and desire for a life free from the suffocating grip of the Machine. Through the contrasting lives of Kuno and Vashti, Forester suggests that the unencumbered, technology-free body is strong and desirable, while the body bound to technology is weak and limited. In the end, the Machine breaks down and topples civilization, but Forester hints that survivors--and hopefully readers--will not make the same mistake of trusting so much in technology.

Forester's look at society as both instantly connected yet utterly disconnected resonates with me as an instructor who has taught full-time in both online and face-to-face (f2f) environments. In my last position as an Assistant Teaching Professor in the Department of English & Technical Communication at the Missouri University of Science & Technology, I received a grant for the 2013-2014 year to support the development of on-campus writing classes into asynchronous sections. I was guided throughout the project by the university's Educational Technology staff, whose skills and experience helped me re-imagine what's possible in online education. This opportunity came from a crossroads of different motivations. I was moving out of state for personal reasons but was still available to teach my course load; the university was pushing for a greater online presence; and the department itself was supportive of exploring pedagogical strategies for online writing instruction. I returned to the f2f classroom when I joined the full-time teaching faculty at Colorado School of Mines, where I continue to teach writing and explore instructional technologies. While I ultimately prefer the f2f classroom, the skills I've developed through online teaching have proved invaluable in helping me use technology more effectively to support my commitment to student engagement and instructor presence.

The experience of developing and teaching online courses was transformative in two key ways. For one, teaching online for a year certainly led me to an improved ability to use and apply technology. Previously, I supported my f2f classrooms with relatively simple and standard technology, from storing course materials and leaving feedback through a learning management system to using an occasional PowerPoint slide or YouTube video in class. I answered student questions via email, but did not integrate e-communications much beyond that. Secondly, I have learned how technology outside of the classroom can make the experience inside the classroom more productive. I have a new appreciation both for the presence and absence of technology. I am less anxious and more accepting of the persistent growth of technology in higher education--a development that can be either an intrusion or a blessing depending on the application. I would never want to completely eradicate technology from teaching, but neither would I opt for Vashti's chair. Online education and the incorporation of technology into teaching are opportunities worth pursuing when balanced with a sound overall pedagogy emphasizing effective student learning.

Forester himself would have a strong preference to the f2f classroom and a fair amount of dread for the online classroom, which can be eerily similar to Vashti's experience of learning and communication. However, such a sweeping critique of online education would be making some misguided assumptions. As Alf Seegert (2010) notes in "Technology and Fleshly Interface in Forster's 'The Machine Stops,'" Vashti's body is arguably "extended" via the Machine, and "enhanced, not diminished" (p. 43), in that the life of the machine has become part of her body and her awareness, resulting in "cyborg-hood" (p. 44). Seegert also notes the problem of assuming that a pure, unmediated body even exists, linking Forster's idealization of "beautiful naked man" to misdirected nostalgia. Our bodies and our experience are, from the instant we are born, entwined with technology in some way, from the shoes we wear to the tools we use, from hammers to laptops. Seegert argues that the "immediacy humans once felt only through gross physical contact now in many respects has given way to virtualized interactions that now feel just as immediate" (p. 44). While the internet still feels "technological," other technologies "like eyeglasses, eating utensils, shoes, clothing, houses, and extensions like writing" are so ingrained in our identity "that we fail to realize they are even technological at all" (p. 41). However, "The Machine Stops" suggests that learning and experience are more authentic when they are direct and embodied. For instance, talking over the telephone or via email would be less authentic than chatting over coffee, since one is mediated by technology and the other is less so (even though getting to the coffee shop probably requires technology). We might extend this to saying that being in a classroom and being surrounded by the

physical presence of a teacher and peers equates to more engaged and productive learning and experience, but what if the room is full of bored, restless students struggling to stay awake during a lecture? Is that a more authentic and effective experience than listening to a lecture online in one's own room?

Forester's nostalgic vision of the body stripped away of all technology is not unlike our tendency to envision the "pure" classroom as a sacred space where professor imparts expertise while students raptly take notes and engage in rigorous discussion. Such nostalgia is evident in warnings about online education in higher education. In his recent op-ed piece "Why Starbucks Baristas Probably Won't Be Sending Letters to Their Arizona State Professors," Jonathan Rees (2014) laments the potentially lost human relationships built in and around the brick and mortar classroom as online opportunities continue to boom, giving both students--and corporations--access to higher education via the distance classroom. Rees writes, "I can't imagine a future dominated by giant online classes whose professors barely know their students, let alone befriend and assist them through their college careers and beyond" (par 10). This dire vision of the online future to come suggests that distance education will sacrifice the valuable one-on-one contact that the traditional classroom supposedly promises.

In "More Face-to-Face, Less Face-to-Screen," Sharon Marshall (2011) compares new digital literacies, such as posting to an online forum, to the "old days," when students scribbled in notebooks. She doesn't want to abandon technology—it's just too inevitable—but the question remains of how to use the technology without too much loss. Marshall wants to balance the good old days with the unstoppable encroachment of technology. She doesn't want to miss out on the connections to be made by simply turning to the person next to us for a conversation. She asks, "How can I learn to teach with technology in a way that doesn't compromise the feelings of community, engagement, focused attention, and sense of personal responsibility that I value so much and want my students to value, too?" (par. 19). Marshall feels that integrating technology subtracts rather than adds to the classroom. Her compromise is to commit to spending more class time "face-to-face" rather than face-to-screen.

Mary Burgan (2006) raises similar concerns in *Whatever Happened to the Faculty* when she notes that "the question of machines for teaching and learning is a question of presence or absence." Burgan believes that "when faculty balk at technology, they do so because their experience cautions them to maintain skepticism" that technology can provide the solution to "higher education's problems of access and cost" (p. 80). While one might assume that that faculty who teach online will become more sophisticated in technology, Brogan warns that the actual result may be that faculty are left "de-skilled," becoming "robotic entities" or "content providers" (p. 100). Faculty, this suggests, will lose touch with the organic and spirited nature of "real" teaching--a teaching that is continually equated with physical presence.

While I share all of these concerns about the online classroom, particularly a "giant" one engineered by corporate interests, Rees' unimaginable future is already a reality for plenty of large f2f classrooms where instructors barely know their students and certainly don't--and simply can't--offer mentoring and friendship in the nostalgic way Rees links to the classroom. It is certainly good to be cautious, skeptical, and concerned, but the more time spent being wary of new technologies, the more time students spend advancing light years ahead of instructors in their familiarity and comfort with technology. Students also expect that the technological opportunities that now make up their everyday world will also be available to them as part of their education. In an example many teachers can relate to, students in class are often quick to search their phones for information during class discussion (often in disregard of a firm cell phone policy). While cell phones can easily become a distraction, giving students certain leeway in researching the information that is at their fingertips can lead to helpful conversations about evaluating the incredible amount of information students can and *will* access. Rather than shy away from technology and online tools, we should be preparing students to use information in effective and intelligent ways.

Educators should also question the assumption that f2f teaching is the "real" classroom experience simply because it happens face-to-face. Perhaps more importantly, it's time to recognize that simply being in a f2f classroom does not mean effective learning is happening. According to Jose Bowen in *Teaching Naked* (2012), most college classrooms are overly dependent on traditional lecture methods or content delivery, to the detriment of challenging students to become independent critical thinkers willing to think on their feet, test out their ideas, and understand that failure is part of growth. Bowen smartly points out

that a large amount of content is now available online, making the traditional use of lecture for content delivery “redundant” (p. 186). He calls for a complete rethinking of the class experience, one which shifts from passive listening and lecture (and student napping) to a focus on active student engagement and problem solving. Understanding the potential use of technology for content delivery outside of class is also understanding the unique opportunity inside of class to engage students in active and collaborative learning experiences.

I agree with Ken Bain’s (2004) simple but profound definition of teaching as “engaging students, engineering an environment in which [students] learn” (p. 49). That type of effective environment is not limited to brick and mortar, but to any place, real or virtual, where instructional decisions are focused on creating an effective learning experience for students. That may be more challenging online—and just not the right fit for some teachers—but it is not technology itself that keeps a classroom from being effective. As Patricia Webb Boyd (2001) explains, “Distance learning technology is neither inherently good nor bad, but presents a moment of opportunity to question our usual standards of teaching” (p. 362). The rising interest in online education is not only an opportunity to explore best practices and possibilities for distance education, but also to re-charge the conversation about what should actually be happening in the f2f classroom. Effective teaching can and *should* be part of both experiences. The reality is that higher education has already embraced online education and instructional technologies, and the question now is not should we or shouldn’t we, but how do we most effectively utilize technology both online and in the f2f classroom to meet that fundamental goal of teaching: helping students learn.

In particular, moving back and forth between online and f2f experiences has challenged me to think about how the presence and absence of the physical body shapes the classroom experience, and what can be both gained and lost in exchanging physical connections for electronic ones. Brogan defines education as “basic acts of cognitive refinement, intellectual discipline, socialization, and identity formation” that must take place in the presence of one human being with another (p. 100). Without the element of physical presence, distance education can certainly create a sense of isolation and missed chances for socialization that can dissuade some instructors from online teaching. The challenges are uniquely daunting, particularly when one wants the online classroom to mimic face-to-face experiences. In “Solitary Confinement: Managing Relational Angst in an Online Classroom,” Laura L. Bush (2009) talks about the “profound loss” both she and her students experienced in an online literature course. There is a “human cost,” she writes, to teaching in a disembodied space (p. 292). While she points out the benefits of online teaching—from avoiding traffic to taking an afternoon nap—these benefits did outweigh the cost of lost connections with students (p. 304). Bush argues that the online environment does not allow for nearly as much “teacher immediacy,” defined as forms of verbal and nonverbal cues such as “gesturing, smiling, using humor and vocal variety, personalizing examples, addressing students by name, questioning, praising, initiating discussion, encouraging feedback, and avoiding tense body positions” (p. 303). Creating audio-visual materials provided useful content, but they did nothing to connect Bush to her students and the feeling of immediacy she was looking for (p. 304). Ultimately, she left the experience unsatisfied; she needed the presence of students to help her teach.

So what does teacher immediacy contribute to teaching that some feel gets lost online? According to Brogan, it’s about motivation. Students who enroll in an online course simply have a hard time finishing without a teacher to motivate them. Presence makes a huge difference. As Brogan puts it, “it takes a teacher to help jump-start most of us, and to keep us going” (p. 92). This is not just about completion rates, though the success rate in online courses is 50 percent, compared to 70-to-75 percent for a comparable face-to-face course (Jenkins, 2011 par. 4). Brogan reports on one study in which both students and teachers offered the same criticisms and concerns about online teaching. The responses suggest that both teacher and student “miss the visual cues from a personal presence, “the nuance in the instructor’s and student’s communication, [and] the reaction of others in a group” (p. 93). Many students thrive when they have the structure of the classroom and accountability of peers and an instructor they see and talk to.

Some teachers also need students to motivate *them* to remain engaged in their duties, to be inspired to think and rethink their practices and approaches, and to remember that the classroom is about gaining skills and sharing experience as much as it is about content. Brogan admits that during her brief stint of teaching a correspondence course she lapsed when her students did. Since then all of her teaching has been face-to-face, keeping her more focused and on task. I can probably relate to this sentiment the

most. Toward the end of my year of a 4/4 online teaching load, I struggled to find the motivation for course prep, and my initial excitement at exploring new technology waned as I began to miss the energy of the f2f classroom. The end of any academic year can wear down one's stamina, but it was markedly more difficult to stay motivated online. I get re-energized knowing that students are waiting for me in the classroom, and that helps me remain more fully engaged in the practice of teaching and in my passion for it.

Despite some drawbacks, the advantages of online teaching have led me to consider what can be gained rather than lost through such a teaching experience. In "Writing Vicariously: The Politics of Presence in the Distance Learning Classroom," Michelle Comstock (2004) addresses the critique that distance education creates "an insidious substitution" (par. 4) where both students and teachers are isolated and mechanical, missing out on the organic and dynamic conversations of the classroom, a place hailed as a "sacred place." The assumption is that an online classroom reduces all learning to mere content and memorization stripped of the critical inquiry and depth commensurate with the f2f classroom. Like myself, Comstock questions the assumptions that sacrificing embodied presence means sacrificing learning, and that virtual presence and identity is somehow less effective. On the contrary, Comstock felt that "dispensing with physical presence created a concomitant sense of increased accessibility" (par. 14). She was more easily and continuously available and in tune with her students, even finding that instructor-student interaction was more intimate than the traditional classroom. The online writing classroom did not omit or erase the body and the self it represented; identity adapted to the new environment and became a new thing (par. 20). The body became something to be articulated and performed through the online environment, a new way to assess one's self and identity beyond the physical. Online, students and myself get to decide how we will represent ourselves to others both in images and text, and this type of identity reflection is no less genuine than those expressed in-person. The performance and expression of the self can be as simple as uploading a profile picture or sharing images to express feelings and experiences. One of my favorite discussion activities from my online research writing course asked students to include in their introduction to the class an image that captured their attitude toward writing, and then explain why.

The online classroom may extend the body in new and transformative ways for some, and hide the body in equally productive ways for others. In "The Invisible Audience and the Disembodied Voice: Online Teaching and the Loss of Body Image," Joanne Buckley (1997), who has spent much of her life in a wheelchair due to cerebral palsy, calls her time spent teaching online "the most experimental, fruitful, and often the most intimate work I have done, mainly because I feel freed from the real--and perceived--constraints of my physical body" (p. 179). Technology offered Buckley a sense of liberation from an identity that was "encumbered" by physical appearance and inseparable from a body image tied to life in a wheelchair (p. 182). She believes that online teaching enables "both student and teacher to concentrate on the message without undue interference from the physical distractions of the body image and the sense of identity that comes with it" (p. 185). The online writing classroom can shift the focus firmly on writing rather than the writer and on content rather than instructor. Much like Comstock, Buckley sees the online writing classroom as a chance to explore the limitations created by the body and the creation of a more authentic self through technology without the disruptions and judgments that can come with embodiment. She explains that her credibility as a teacher is enhanced when students assess her work and her writing rather than her physical appearance, and the same holds true for her own evaluation of their coursework. She writes, "The online revolution in teaching is helping us to shift our consciousness toward an awareness that one can be personally effective without appearing in person" (p. 186).

Comstock and Buckley saw opportunities in their online experiences because they approached online education as something distinct from the f2f classroom rather than as a significantly inferior substitute. Expecting to mimic the spontaneous conversation of a particularly robust in-class discussion in an online course will likely lead to disappointment; expecting the online class to lead to thoughtful writing is a reasonable expectation that can lead to highly satisfying online experiences for both students and the instructor. What some might call "loss" from being online could be relabeled as an "exchange" as one re-adjusts to a very different type of learning environment. In "Seven Strategies for Enabling Faculty Success in Distance Education," S.L. Howell et al. (2004) note that when faculty initially transition to an online class, they assume a minimal learning curve and attempt to implement f2f classroom techniques

into the online environment. However, they soon realize that the effective use of technology is imperative in communicating with students and creating an effective environment. Many realize that effective teaching online means learning new skills (p. 35). There is no doubt that a successful online classroom necessitates an awareness of effective technologies for creating both engagement and presence, and that a proven f2f activity might need significant re-tailoring to work online. However, the technologies I learned online increased my teaching skill set for *both* online and f2f environments, and this transferability between environments was the most exciting aspect of online course development.

Such skills are especially important as technology continues to impact education. In *Teaching Naked*, Bowen argues that with so much readily available content online, it is time to flip the classroom from a focus on content delivery to a focus on creating learning experiences that cannot be replicated through an online search. The classroom experience can matter, but only if we address how technology and online opportunities can complement the f2f classroom, rather than treating such opportunities as opposing forces. The classroom should be a place where students check their understanding of content and learn to apply information; in this model, the instructor is de-emphasized as a content expert and instead reinforces a more collaborative and democratic model of mutual problem solving and discussion. Bowen notes that while some faculty strongly prefer the live delivery of information, today's students are familiar with online content, online searches, and reading from a screen, and they expect some of that to be used and available as part of their education (p. 104). Seeking to give students a "pure" experience divorced from any technology is not necessarily one they will find authentic or useful considering the highly technical world they live in and must navigate on a daily basis. Bowen believes the best education of the future will be hybrid, and our challenge will be deciding how to balance the use of technology and online resources with a more effective use of face-to-face teaching time (p. 237). Depending too much on either will lead to missed opportunities for engagement and effective pedagogical opportunities. My understanding of Bowen's hybrid future was deepened by teaching online and discovering what technology can offer any instructor interested in engaging students in a technological world. I see myself as a "cyborg teacher" who prefers f2f classrooms that are enhanced by technology--a merging of the values represented by Vashti and Kuno. I would not hesitate to teach online again, especially now that I am better equipped to promote presence and engagement without ever physically seeing my students. My experience has showed me, as it did Buckley, that physical presence is not a prerequisite for learning.

In transitioning from the f2f classroom to full-time online teaching, I used discussion boards in Blackboard to engage students in course content. I posted weekly prompts in the discussion boards based on readings and writing assignments. Students responded with an initial post, typically due by Wednesday. They returned to the discussion board to post two substantial responses to peers by the end of the week. Discussions became a place to debate course topics and explore understandings and misunderstandings related to assigned reading, an expectation that held students accountable for course readings. Other times discussions became opportunities to brainstorm paper ideas, share work in progress, and receive feedback throughout the writing process. Students were particularly responsive to short peer review sessions through the discussion board; they not only received comments from peers and myself on their own work, but they were also able to see how their classmates approached course assignments and provide feedback. *Writing became highly collaborative*. As noted by Buckley, the physical body can fade into importance when online writing becomes the focus. In online discussion, it's harder for one dominating voice to take over, creating a place for students to share ideas and explore perspectives through the medium of writing.

When I returned to the f2f classroom, I continued to incorporate online discussion. Online discussion boards can both extend the f2f classroom and better prepare students for class by allowing them to carefully reflect on readings and compose their thoughts prior to group discussions. While the f2f classroom supports organic, spontaneous conversations, it can also exclude and limit some voices. Students may be too shy or self-conscious to contribute to group discussions, or there's simply not enough time or opportunity for everyone to feed into the conversation. Some students will always be intimidated by the real-time give and take, though their percolating ideas may be among the most useful. Online discussion posts in my f2f classrooms offer productive starting points for class conversations, allowing students to reference their writing as they articulate their ideas more thoughtfully. In my current f2f writing classrooms, I require frequent posts that ask students to reflect on course topics and readings in anticipation of class discussion and activities. Posts are due the night before class meets, and I

incorporate them in different ways. Sometimes I start class with an informal “buzz” session by breaking students into small groups to discuss their posts, observations, and questions. Since students have already done the work of thinking and writing about the material, class time can quickly lead to problem-solving and discussion. I frequently hear students begin class contributions with “In my post, I wrote about...” before expanding on their response. I also incorporate posts directly into PowerPoint slides or woven into brief lectures, thereby making the students’ voices a critical part of the f2f session. I indicate to students that their ideas and their writing carries important weight in the classroom, and that I am paying attention to the work they do both in and out of class. I have also started class by presenting my own summaries of the posts and letting discussion build from there. I might quote a particularly intriguing sentence, offer a humorous paraphrase of competing perspectives, or pose student-generated questions for the class to tackle. In addition to preparing students for discussions, the posts keep me tapped into the critical thinking and writing habits of my students.

My year online taught me how to more effectively use familiar e-communications like email. One particularly successful element I introduced in my online courses and then transferred to my f2f sections was a weekly checklist. In “Analyzing Students’ Perceptions of Their Learning in Online and Hybrid First-Year Composition Courses,” Patricia Webb Boyd (2011) explains that an effective online experience will include both prompt feedback and “multiple kinds of feedback” (p. 228). Checklists became an important part of how I provided what should more accurately be called “feedforward” as I attempted to keep students on task from the beginning. Many students in my online sections were daunted by the task of completing coursework without the structure of the classroom and the physical guidance of an instructor. Checklists anticipated that challenge. These lists reviewed each task students needed to complete during the upcoming week, including any due dates and important reminders. I emailed checklists to the class each Friday, and they were also posted on Blackboard. Checklists elicited an enthusiastic response from students, and I received several emails from students over the course of the school year thanking me for extra support. Checklists also became my own tool for organizing my weeks and keeping my prep focused and timely.

The use of weekly checklists and my increased dependence on email communication in general transformed the way I saw e-communication as a teaching tool for the f2f classroom. I have increased my out-of-classroom contact with students, particularly for what I call the “paperwork” of the course, such as reminders, updates, and extra credit opportunities. I now use brief emails to sum up key points in class or add an additional perspective to discussions, especially when time ran short in class. Similar to checklists, at the end of every week I post a Blackboard announcement that quickly reviews the upcoming week, which is a feature I never used before going online. My usual mantra was “check the schedule.” Students come to rely on Blackboard announcements to keep them up to date. One week I failed to include a reminder for a homework assignment, and several students did not complete it though it was listed on the course schedule. While I still expect students to listen in class and follow the course schedule, weekly announcements become an additional way to keep class time productive, especially for students who, as Bowen politely reminds us, “don’t sleep with your syllabus” (p. 106). Reinforcement through e-communication is often the small nudge some students need. Additionally, as Bowen points out, “every announcement, clarification, footnote, or reference that can be done electronically frees up class time for interaction and discussion” (p. 105). *Teaching Naked* addresses many more ways e-communication can be used for content delivery, from the quick reminders that have become my common practice to more substantial extensions of content for both post-classroom reflection and pre-classroom preparation.

One of the most challenging and personally rewarding aspects of my year online was learning to create and produce course videos. For Laura Bush, audio-visual materials did little to negate her sense of engagement in the online environment. For me, creating video overviews of course content was a productive way to feel connected to the course and express my investment to students. Videos presented intriguing problems to solve: how could I best capture my students’ interest, keep them involved in the material, and fulfill my own desires as a teacher to find engaging methods of writing instructions? I discovered a surprising source of satisfaction in preparing lecture videos for my online students. These videos were an opportunity to introduce my personality, style, and presence into the course while learning basic video production, something I knew almost nothing about. Creating effective videos was—and is—an ongoing learning process. Working with the university educational staff, I

produced short instructional videos by first creating a set of slides in PowerPoint and then recording them with narration using the video production software Camtasia. Initially my videos were unpracticed and rather long-winded, but eventually I whittled them to much shorter 4-5 minute talks that aimed to be more “movie-like” by focusing on images versus text. For example, I produced a video titled “Analysis is as Easy as Apple Pie” that began by asking students to “analyze” an apple pie; after pausing to allow for student reflection, I then showed a series of apple pie images while explaining the many ways one might talk about and think about apple pie, from types of ingredients to cultural symbolism and pop culture references. This led into my introduction of a course assignment that asked them to perform a close critical reading of a text.

One of my long term goals for my current writing courses is to create a series of writing-specific overviews that can be easily transferred between different sections and reviewed according to student need. One obstacle to this goal is the amount of time video production takes; however, once produced, a well-made video can be copied from section to section for as long as the video remains relevant. The video library of writing tips and techniques that I plan to develop will give students access to course concepts any time during the semester, and it will give me a tailored means for offering additional guidance on student writing while extending my presence beyond the classroom.

While discussion boards, e-communications, and videos have all been highly valuable and transferable skills, nothing has matched the practicality and effectiveness of online conferencing. Taking the suggestion of a colleague and the Ed Tech staff, I decided to use Google Drive to hold synchronous meetings with students about their writing. The big advantage to online conferencing is the flexibility it gives me to work around both my schedule and the hectic lives of students. In Drive, I review student work using the comment feature to ask questions, offer suggestions, and explain where further revision was needed. Students chat with me about my comments, ask questions, and edit their work while I watch. Compared to an in-person conference, online writing conferences feel much more collaborative and dynamic as students became more actively engaged in their work during our conversations. Drive lets us get quickly to the business of writing. Overall, students were more engaged in reviewing their work in Drive, and conversations were more productive and comfortable than most of my in-person conferences. Conferencing in my office can be a toss up: some students come prepared to focus on their work and engage in the process, while others are passive and quiet, asking few to no questions.

For many students, online technologies and tools for communication are second nature, and students who were unfamiliar with Drive often pick it up quickly and have no difficulty holding a conversation through chat features. However, one unexpected lesson I learned when I first implemented online conferencing is that there are still a significant number of students who shy away from new technologies, even when they are at a technology-focused school. Some students in my online courses were placed there out of need rather than preference, and apprehensions about an online course escalate when combined with learning new tools. Some students grow instantly frustrated when they don’t “get” a technology that seems so second nature for others and is part of their success in the course. It is important to offer clear instructions and patient guidance for any technologies used and to never assume a tool is so simple that no instructions are needed. While I generally take it for granted that students will be more technologically savvy than I am, that is simply not always true. Beyond providing clear guidelines, communication and availability become key when helping students manage course technologies. This is where creating a sense of presence becomes vitally important to students who may struggle to visualize you as real instructor looking out for their success. It is important to communicate consistently and to communicate in multiple formats. When meeting through Google Drive, for example, I kept my email open and my phone handy in case of technical problems. I also became very quick on the draw when it came to replying to students through good “old-fashioned” technology like email, which is a form of communication no student had any difficulty using.

In my f2f writing courses, I now provide students with the option to meet in person, online, or both. Learning and implementing technology is not just about “proving” one’s existence in an online course, but also about expressing availability and care for students in the on-ground classroom. Drive gives both students and myself flexibility and choice, and it gives students more access to out-of-class guidance, particularly when schedule conflicts arise or when I’m off-campus. Incorporating Drive also introduces some students to a technology that can be very helpful in writing and researching, which has been true for myself as well. After introducing Drive into my classes, I soon found myself using it in new ways for

my own writing, to the point that I have changed a long-standing tradition of scribbling in notebooks to drafting in Drive, this article included.

Ultimately, neither Vashti's extreme choice of complete reliance on technology nor Kuno's commensurately extreme solution to denounce technology altogether offer viable options for our twenty-first century lives or our twenty-first century classrooms. An online classroom reminds us of the necessity for human connection, engagement, and presence, especially when the physical body is absent. A f2f classroom offers us a valuable place to engage with students in physical immediacy, but that space and our presence becomes limited if we don't explore how technology can enhance the learning environments we create as well as our sense of availability and presence to students. I am a much more satisfied instructor in f2f classrooms, but only through teaching online did I find myself beneficially faced with learning to communicate more effectively through familiar technologies like email and less familiar ones like Google Drive and Camtasia. I am now equipped with a broader skillset that complements my values and goals as an instructor, and I am better prepared for the hybrid balance Bowen predicts for the future--one I myself see quickly developing on the frontiers of higher education.

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