



Online 2000 Edition

Teaching on the Web — Exploring the Meanings of Silence

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Keywords: Online, world wide web, Internet, teaching and learning, pedagogy, postgraduate education.

Article style and source: STAR Report. Original ultiBASE Publication.

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Abstract

Abstract This report deals with challenges that teachers may face when moving from face-to-face teaching to online delivery. Tried and true 'instincts', honed in years of teaching experience, are not necessarily directly transferable online. There is a radically different tempo of communication and an absence of the visual, audio and tactile cues that we take for granted in our everyday teaching. To a significant extent this puts the teacher at the behest of her students' actions (or lack of them).

Student passivity or 'silence' is difficult to interpret. The meanings of these silences have to be actively sought. The social, non-academic aspects of teaching take on a heightened importance online. Teachers have to work hard to develop a sense of community in their online groups. There is a need to develop an online 'voice' or persona, and to use language thoughtfully. This is critical to establishing a welcoming, 'safe' environment that encourages students to contribute to discussions that are written, and may therefore be invested with more gravity than is the case with speech.

Introduction

A colleague and I delved into online teaching for the first time this semester. This paper is a rather informal attempt to document for other 'first timers' some of the things we learned. For learn we did. We can safely say to anyone else preparing to 'go online' that they will be stimulated, perturbed, excited, challenged.

There is a good deal of literature around dealing with teaching and learning online. Laurillard (1993) provides a theoretical framework for considering the adoption of new learning technologies. The use of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), particularly in a distance education context, is well documented, with Littleton and Light (1999), Harasim, Starr, Teles and Turoff (1995), and Starr (1994) providing good examples. Although my colleague and I could claim to have been at least moderately well informed about the field of online teaching before starting, we found that nothing quite prepares you for the actual experience.

There are numerous major educational issues to confront and resolve when delivering learning material on the Web -- like designing learning tasks that will engage students, and choosing material which is suitable for delivery via the Web. However, these are not the subjects of this brief discussion. I want to deal with a substantive issue that is too easily ignored or trivialised -- pedagogy in the online environment. Hara (1998) typifies the wealth of material dealing with students' nervousness about using online technologies. I intend to relate some instances of teacher's securities and insecurities when moving into online teaching.

For the last three months I have been experimenting with online tools with a small trial group of first year Advanced Diploma of Computer Science students at RMIT University, while also acting as a mentor for a colleague, E, teaching an online subject for the first time. Hers is one of RMIT's postgraduate education subjects and it is delivered wholly online. E is highly skilled and a very experienced teacher in a myriad of teaching environments, including writing a couple of short courses for Web delivery. [top](#)

Challenges and rewards

My mentoring role has been to support my colleague with the technology and to be a person she can talk to regularly about her new teaching role. The need for support of teachers and academics in these early days of online delivery cannot be underestimated.

Early adopters of new technologies can easily find themselves isolated, ignored and problem solving in an intellectual vacuum. E's comments about teaching online are telling: 'It's very lonely out here'; 'For a teacher this is a whole different thing. Sometimes it's really difficult'; 'It's only just a small portion of my teaching load, yet it's all-consuming. You're all the time thinking, "what can I do, what can I try?"' We both found that our tried and true 'instincts', honed in years of teaching experience, were challenged. Teaching techniques that you wield effortlessly face to face, like a master painter wields a brush, may not be valid online.

We both needed our regular discussions about our 'online work', to help alleviate stress, to sound each other out about ideas for new approaches, to solve problems, to complain, to boast. We were surprised to find ourselves spending hours reflecting on our teaching practice, stimulated by anxiousness to ensure that we were delivering a worthwhile online learning experience. Sometimes it seemed we could ill afford it, but it was possibly some of the most valuable time we spent this semester. Ironically, my own reflection about online work resulted in changes to my face-to-face teaching. I 'discovered' new and better ways to teach some topics and concepts than I used before. I also completely changed the focus and direction of my ongoing efforts to develop new learning materials. [top](#)

The tempo of online communication

Initially with every class, teachers struggle to establish relaxed, free-flowing and open communication within the class. Thus, one of E's highest priorities for her online classes was to encourage students to use the CMC, or threaded discussion facility. For a couple of months, E laboured with an apparent lack of enthusiasm for threaded discussion among one group of her online students. Their postings were sparse and infrequent; responses to E's postings were often slow. One afternoon, E exclaimed in exasperation:

'There's an extraordinary lack of courtesies. I mean, they don't let me know anything, they don't reply to my e-mails, they don't reply to my messages in the forum! There's just this awful, sort of silence. So, it's incredibly harrowing for the teacher. They don't realise or I'm sure they wouldn't do it.'

Just two days later E spoke excitedly to me about how one student had clearly made significant progress through the learning material, another had informed her of communication difficulties, and another had posted a small but significant item in the threaded discussion.

One of the hardest things to orient to in online teaching is the radically different tempo of communication. A discussion may span days or weeks, instead of minutes or hours. It may seem like that message you posted two days ago, that you put your heart and soul into, has been ignored. In reality the students might only go to your subject once or twice each week, if that. E and I have both had the joy of reading stimulating responses from students to messages that we had posted so long ago we had virtually forgotten them! It can be far more satisfying to read the reflections of a student after a period of engagement

with your learning material, than listening to their spontaneous response to your question in a tutorial or workshop.

It is an everyday occurrence for a teacher to ask a question and initially not receive a response. You may rephrase the question, or nominate a particular individual to answer it, or deliver an expanded explanation or demonstration before asking it again, or you may drop it altogether, depending upon how you interpret the lack of response from the students. Usually though, before doing any of these things, you wait. The waiting time is variable, depending upon your gut feel for the class and its involvement at the time, but it has limits—seldom more than a few seconds.

How long do you wait for a response in an online threaded discussion? A day, a week, a month? Any and all of these may be reasonable at one time or another. E's students are postgraduate students, mostly working full time, many of them as teachers or academics. They are very busy people, doing the subject online because it allows them a high level of flexibility. What 'right' does EM have to force a timetable on to them? Should she repeat her request, as one may well do in the face-to-face situation if a question fails to elicit a response? How often can you do that before you stop being a concerned teacher and become a pest? On the other hand, you cannot abdicate responsibility for helping your students to manage their workload and to ensure that they get the most out of their subject by doing the activities you know to be beneficial. [top](#)

What does silence mean?

Perhaps the most obvious difference between face-to-face and online teaching -- certainly the most difficult one to manage -- is isolation. In the face-to-face situation, the students' body language, the expressions on their faces, the direction of their gaze, their physical agitation or lack of it, their under-breath muttering or complete silence, can give meaning to a lack of formal response. The visual, audio and tactile cues we take for granted in our everyday teaching, and which we rely on as guides to our action, are utterly absent in the online environment.

The casual conversation with a student after class, the brief encounter in the corridor, the snippet of social conversation in a workshop or tutorial -- these do not exist in the same way online. What replaces them? How do you run after a student you identify as needing assistance and probe further in a private, yet casual way? E has often posted messages to her students asking them for their comments about a particular issue, only to receive just one reply, or two if she's lucky. What is she to make of this 'silence'? Do her questions fail to stimulate? Are they misunderstood? Are her students are bored and uninterested? Or, do they find the material too difficult to respond to effectively? Maybe they are experiencing technical difficulties and cannot communicate at all?

Unless the students actively respond to E, she cannot know if they are experiencing difficulties, and so she cannot intervene to help them. More importantly, in order to know what a student thinks or feels it's necessary for the student him or herself to *actively communicate*. The teacher in this scenario is at the behest of her students' actions (or lack

of them). The centre of control has moved markedly away from the teacher, to the students.

In fact, from the students' point of view, at least or until they are fully engaged with their learning material, the easiest thing for them to do with regard to online communication is ... nothing. Why boot up, log on, collect your thoughts, compose a message, revise and edit it, then post it? The investment in such an exercise is much larger than, say, making a remark twenty seconds long in a tutorial that no one will remember afterwards anyway. Online, it feels like no one can see you, no one can hear you. You feel, to all intents and purposes, invisible. The truth, of course, is different. Tracking of students' activity is pervasive and constant. The online teacher can and does know if a particular student has logged on, when they do and which pages in the online subject they visit. But it doesn't feel that way to the student user. It will only become apparent to them later, when or if the teacher e-mails them asking if they are having difficulties.

E found that face-to-face induction or 'get to know each other sessions' were very important to hold early on in the piece. We found that it was most important to first define your own expectations about communication, lay it out for students from the outset and then stick to it. If you expect students to use CMC, rather than private e-mail, as the primary mode of communication with you, you have to tell them so. If you expect the students to check their bulletin boards regularly, you have to let them know how often. If your expectations are not being fulfilled you have to follow up with e-mails or phone calls. Communication is critical. It is the strength of the online mode, as opposed to broadcast media like print, radio and video. The rule is, actively avoid isolation. [top](#)

Community

At this stage, three months into the subject, E's students don't 'speak' amongst themselves as far as she is aware. Interestingly, in E's view, at the halfway mark of her experience with online classes, she feels that she has, in some ways, a better appreciation of individual characteristics of her students than she often gets in face-to-face teaching. Mostly E's students communicate with her one-to-one, via e-mail. The lines of communication still all pass through E -- effectively multiple teacher-student communications. The students as yet have no 'community'. Yet the establishment of a sense of community is often one of the chief objectives of a teacher with any class. The achievement of it is a milestone in the progress of a given class in the mind of the teacher. Often it signifies the start of a foray into a new, more rich and vibrant curriculum. This is why E feels the present lack of this sense in her online class so keenly; why she invests so much time and energy in trying to find ways to stimulate group discussion.

Even with an on-campus class, it may take a whole semester, sometimes more, to begin to feel that a real group identity is starting to form. Because the general tempo of interaction is slower online, it may take longer. So, it is early days for E's classes yet. In the meantime, she uses the smallest pretexts as potential icebreakers, to encourage group communication. E started telling her students about relevant upcoming public lectures,

TV programs, useful or just plain entertaining Web sites she had come across, and so on. With one group of her online students the seemingly impossible effort to organise an online 'chat', or synchronous mode discussion, became a useful cohesive device. In discussing their various commitments, the obstacles they faced in co-ordinating all being at a computer at a certain time, the students began to talk about their lives. This class is now becoming more active in the threaded discussion area.

We were surprised at how highly sensitised we became to the social, non-academic aspects of teaching. It is almost embarrassing to say so, but there are other things to 'talk' to students about than the course material. Yet, in the interests of saving time, it is very easy to put such things aside in a totally online environment such as E is working within and to become completely absorbed in the academic content of the site. [top](#)

Online 'voice'

An issue that you become conscious of when teaching online is that of your online 'voice' or online 'persona'. All teachers are well aware of the element of performance in their teaching, the adoption of your teaching 'character' when you enter the lecture theatre, classroom or tutorial room. But what sort of 'character' do you want to convey online, and how will you convey it with a keyboard? Think of the complexity for a stage actor to transfer their favourite characterisation into a form suitable for radio, and you have a sense of what is involved.

In the beginning many find the online environment cold. A feeling of community generally does not emerge for some time. E said to me, 'I do think that having a sort of classroom rapport, a very sensitive style, which I think I've got in some ways in the classroom, is very important online. But getting it across is ... well, it's very hard.'

E has spent many hours in consideration of this issue, in various ways. On several occasions E worried to me that her online voice might be too formal -- she is an English teacher and she uses punctuation and capital letters, starts her messages 'Dear so and so' and ends them 'Regards' or similar. Referring to a personal friend of hers, E commented to me, 'Her e-mails are so slapdash, they've got no punctuation, they're just awful. But she feels that that's what an e-mail is, and she obviously feels very uncomfortable with the formality that I use to reply to her. I can't help myself, that's just my way'. On another occasion, referring to her own online students and her online 'formality', E said 'Maybe I'm not relaxed enough, maybe that's why they don't speak to me'. Of course, that isn't the case at all. E's messages may be formally written in the conventional grammatical sense, but their content is welcoming, rather than intimidating, non-judgemental, not threatening. [top](#)

Language

I, on the other hand, am more likely than E to use informal language, like slang, or abbreviations like 'G'day', 'Hi', and so on as a way of appearing friendly. This is conscious. Yet I am much less likely than she to devote space to 'social' communication,

or discussion of issues that I consider 'extraneous' or peripheral to the purpose of the discussion. There isn't any right way to do it, just as there isn't any one teacher's 'character'. You do have to define your own online persona and then think quite carefully on various occasions about how to convey it.

Many participants in online communities barely use any punctuation at all. This is both practical, allowing faster typing and hence communication, and also conveys a sense of informality. They may use 'emoticons', like ☺, or :-), :-o, etc, or abbreviations (lol -- laugh out loud, fal -- fall about laughing) as a way of adding important 'non-verbal' communication to online discussions.

One of the great advantages of the threaded discussion is the time it allows for reflection, and the possibility for editing/refinement of one's remarks. For teacher and student, this can be either liberating or intimidating, or both, depending upon who you are and the context of your discussion. Because online comments are written, they tend to be invested with a gravity greater than is the case with normal speech. If you 'say' something 'silly' online, it will stay there, for all to see, for everyone to reflect on. And you are reminded of it every time you visit that discussion area. As E put it jocularly once, 'It's like, if I'm sending an e-mail to the vice-chancellor, that's the feeling the students have.' One of E's students actually told her that she was terrified to post her comment on the bulletin board. When I asked why, E told me that it was because 'it was going to stay there, whatever she put, every single word. She told me it was 'gruelling'".

This may mean that, for some students anyway, threaded discussions are not conducive to thinking out loud, to tossing out ideas for testing, to speculation. Students may be initially more inclined to weigh what they say, to be more 'guarded', than perhaps they would in ordinary conversation. Others may find that the time they get to reflect and compose their comments invests them with a power they don't ordinarily feel in face-to-face communication.

Partly it is awareness of this that has made E so conscious of her tone in all her communications with her students. As in face-to-face teaching, the online teacher needs to reassure students that this is a learning environment, in which you are allowed, even expected, to make mistakes. The language the teacher uses is all-important in this. As well, E has had to develop a routine of checking her online 'classrooms' regularly, on a rigid schedule, even if she does not expect to find new messages there. Failure to respond promptly to a student request or other communication could be catastrophic. It is disarming, even alarming, to invest the time to post a message and then get no response.

In summary, using online communication requires a strong conscious effort, planning, forethought, time. But forewarned is forearmed. One of the best things that any teacher intending to go online can do is take an online course themselves. Failing that, participate in one of the many 'virtual conferences' being held these days. It is so much easier to understand how your students will find learning online if you have experienced it yourself.

Ultimately, however, like the ad says, you just have to do it. Effective and exciting teaching and learning require you to leave your comfort zone, to explore unknown territory, to challenge and be challenged. For E and I the learning curve has been steep. There are things we did well, and things we might have done better. As with our teaching in other modes, we are already making plans for extensive revisions to our online subjects in preparation for the next semester. [top](#)

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