

Saving Face in Cyberspace: Transition to On-line Teaching in a Sociology Program

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Abstract This paper delineates the intellectual and socio-emotional processes of shifting from face-to-face to on-line teaching at the Online BA Program in Sociology at the CUNY School of Professional Studies. Using a sociological lens, I will explore the concept of "presence" in cyberspace to elucidate the possibilities and limitations for humanizing the sociological classroom without embodiment or the structure of synchronous interaction.

Keywords Online Teaching, Resocialization, Cyberspace, Identity, Pedagogy in Sociology

education purveyors are working to make this virtual mode of teaching and learning familiar--to normalize it. For a sociologist, it is a social constructionist data mine for looking at the technological transformation of social reality and human relations.

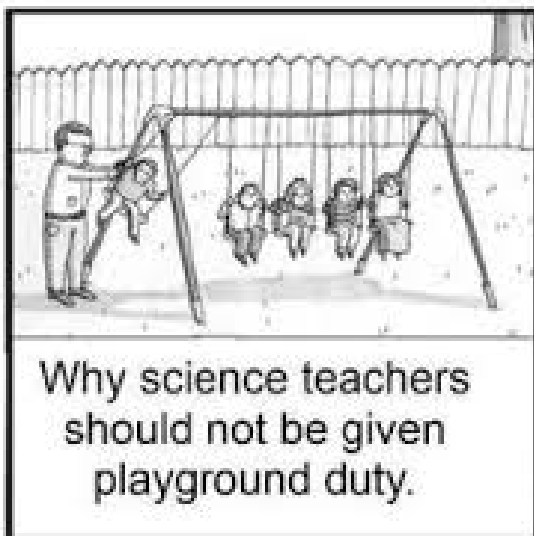


Figure 1. Adaptation

We're told in online teaching that visual media helps to engage students. Lubricate the audience. Sure, we know this from face-to-face teaching as well. In my view, this cartoon is a metaphor for the risks and pleasures that sociologists may experience when taking on the duty of teaching online. Turning on its head our usual search to "make the familiar strange," we enter into the otherworldly playground of cyber-teaching with both curiosity and skepticism about how universities and the minions of digital



Figure 2. Mentoring

I started teaching online at the CUNY School of Professional Studies in fall 2014 after 20 years of full and part-time teaching face-to-face. I had never before taught online, although I had passing familiarity with Blackboard, the online platform used by CUNY. In terms of formal training, I took an online workshop in online teaching for two weeks last summer, and since then I've taken a half dozen professional development trainings online through our college's Office of Faculty Development and Instructional Technology. I taught two classes in fall 2014--an Introduction to Research Methods class and a course called "Writing at Work." This semester I am teaching Introduction to Sociology, and again, the Research Methods class. *I am green.*

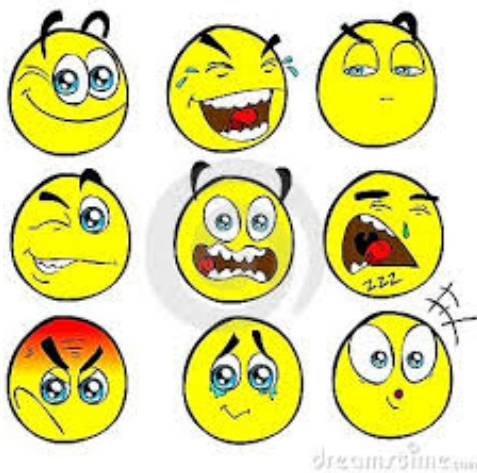
Given how little a bit of time I've had with online teaching, I've carried out little systematic research on the topic. Of course, I've been jotting down notes from my own experience and I have data from student evaluations and

faculty observations. That said, I realize it takes a fair amount chutzpah to write a paper on a topic I still know so little about. Perhaps my relative ignorance and lack of experience will give me a unique perspective in the foregoing analysis. Neither an expatriate of face-to-face nor yet a full-fledged passport holder for the virtual world, this liminal position can hopefully lead me to formulate some edgy sociological questions.

In this paper, I will use vignettes from these first months of my time as an online teacher to explore the debate over the limits and possibilities of trying to humanize social relations in the context of asynchronous, distance education. I am thinking about and will refer to this process as a *resocialization* much in the way that Goffman [6] meant this term--as a process of tearing down and rebuilding an individual's role and socially constructed sense of self.

1. Resocialization

In time, I've been getting acculturated to online teaching from many sources. One mantra I keep hearing over and over again is: 'it's important that you maintain a presence in your class...interact with students online and let them know you're there.' While I have since become aware of the substantial literature on this topic, the message was plain from the start: the teacher's presence needs to be *felt* by the students. *Social presence* defined as the "degree to which a person is perceived as "real" in mediated communication [7] is often identified as key to success in student participation, learning, and collaboration in online pedagogy. [3] Here was some advice I received on how to enhance social presence in my online sociology classes:



"Emoticons (e.g., smiley faces) are anthropomorphic symbols ...[influencing] social presence in online courses by compensating for the lack of voice inflections, facial expressions, and other physical gestures." [9 p100]

Figure 3. Humanize

a) Symbols

A pioneer of one of the online programs at my college, one mentor guides me to use images--pictures, illustrations, cartoons--to jazz up weekly announcements...even to change the banner photos on my Blackboard course site to reflect holiday celebrations and seasonal shifts. I supposed the idea is that if you post images that bring punch or drama to your announcements or you change the look of your course site as the season progresses, students will sense your presence. One fellow faculty member in my training course put it this way, "announcements can help create a sense of the instructor's presence by giving students a sense that a real person is organizing and overseeing the course. In other words, the course is not on autopilot." Depending on what you post, students will see that you have some personality. This was one of my favorite images to decorate my research course site:

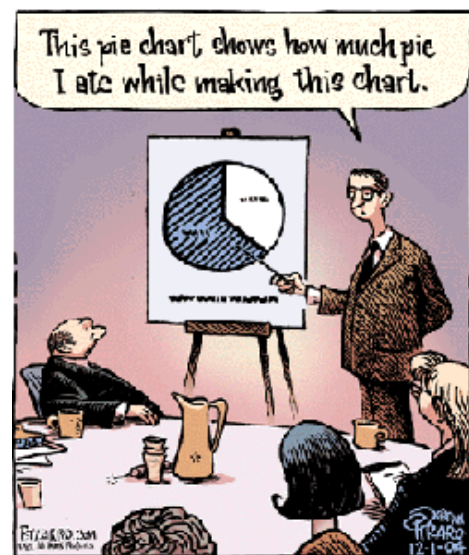


Figure 4. Make 'em laugh

All kidding aside, I had a ball selecting such images (as I've had with finding cartoons for this paper). And I did like the notion that students might get that I had a sense of humor and could poke fun at our course work. There is growing evidence, in fact, that emotional presence in the classroom--including humor--is an influential part of learning--online and otherwise. [2] I must say, however, that the image-posting activity can seem a bit infantile, or like a cheap ploy to sidle up to my students (for what I'm not even sure). I don't know how students read these attempts at warming up the course site. I don't even know if they notice them. (No one has yet commented. And, of course, regrettably, I can hear no laughter.) But I'm advised to do this and I *am* doing this; it is part of my training. Its page one of the impression management crash course I'm taking to adapt to and humanize the virtual classroom.



Figure 5. Swamped

b) Omnipresence

Colleague-Mentor #2 tells me that typically we promise to respond to student questions within 24 hours, but this could be stretched to 36. A version of this guideline is written down in a faculty manual and appears on our syllabi. Beyond our college's admirable commitment to be "high touch"--ready at the quick to assist students with technical and informational issues--the expressive function of the policy is to seize opportunities to connect with students--to have them feel a caring presence, not an amorphous absence. Again we return to the project of trying to humanize the online venture.



"Sorry, I can't—I have to be everywhere."

Figure 6. Boundaryless

A glaring paradox, it seems to me, is in the image of the teacher as both omnipresent and invisible--the teacher who is *always there*--potentially so at least and yet, never seen. Apart from *very* real concerns this sets up for work overload, I've wondered what impact this contradictory dynamic might be having on the quality of my students' communication with me. Is there a "disinhibition effect" at play in cyber learning environments as Suler [11] posits? That is, do students who send me long personal email missives feel freer to share because they don't see me? I have been inundated by emails about family problems, troubles with bosses, vacation

schedule-assignment deadline conflicts, complaints about the level of participation of specific students in group work. Does my quasi-anonymity make me seem like I'm a safe container for confession of student troubles?



Figure 7. Estranged intimacy

Granted, I used to receive similar notes from my students in face-to-face classes--but I'd formed bonds with those students during class, office hours, and in the context of college activities and forums. A blog entry by a faculty colleague who participated in my online training program conveyed a similar sense of disjunction in teacher-student contacts:

"Overall, I find online teaching to be necessary, useful and progressive, yet complicated, ambiguous and somewhat lonely, all at the same time...I like that online learning makes us more technologically savvy and allows us to learn from any location. Yet I find that the chats may not fully replicate an in-person environment. Although the students seem to connect during various chats, I do not feel as though I connected with my fellow students in the same way that I do in person...As a new professor, I am challenged by the ambiguity of the online learning environment."

Online interactions with students *are* different. They convey an estranging sense of intimacy and familiarity. I'm starting to come to grips with the fact that my students are *central* to constructing me as the teacher. They make me question who I am and what I'm doing with them.

It seems critical at this juncture to bracket what the 24-hour response guideline and other impression management tips presuppose and that is, that without conscious, engineered effort to counter the endemic isolation and asociality of cyberspace, online teacher-student relationships risk being devoid of authenticity and real connection. It takes work and involves a range of social actors. I'm sure Arlie Hochschild [8] could help us understand this as a new kind of emotional labour.



Figure 8. Best laid plans

2. Collaboration

During my summer preparatory training, I learned a lot about the benefits of creating collaborative opportunities for students. There is a good deal of evidence that collaborative work, team projects, peer exchange and the like--reduce the feeling of isolation, deepen learning, and build skills for life--particularly work life. While studies show higher levels of satisfaction among online students who report higher levels of social presence [3], data are inconclusive about the extent to which this matters for performance. Scholars do agree, however, that learning and critical thinking are optimized through interaction and discussion with peers. Peer collaboration and discussion are known to stimulate fresh ideas, diverse interpretations, and accommodate varied learning strategies. [1] Collaborative work compels students to "defend, clarify, elaborate and reform" their views. [15, p64] At the same time, collaboration in the online environment is supposed to complement to the self-paced, flexible, independent learning approach--promised by our digital course offerings. Therein lies the rub.



Figure 9. Team work

I was nearing the end of my first virtual semester when my

English professor mentor--a veritable veteran in online work--suggested that I forget trying to orchestrate which students to group with others for project collaboration. No matter how much crafting goes into sorting students into clusters that would seem to be favorable to learning, he said, students are perennially frustrated by group work. The complaint is usually that it's difficult in the asynchronous milieu for students to get in touch with each other to discuss the work. Some feel injustice in the division of labor and reward that all too often evolves--e.g., a few do most of the work while all get the credit.

Despite his caution, I did go in for the group assignments and I enrolled students in what seemed to be learning-optimal teams. But my online mentor was mostly right. Students tended to avoid team interaction; they seemed to have more illnesses and workplace difficulties over the couple of weeks that the group work was to take place than they did over the rest of the semester. Of course it is quite possible that my own efforts fell short--that I didn't structure or facilitate the collaborations well. The fact that most of our students are working adults juggling multiple life responsibilities probably played a decisive a role in the group work challenges. Fortunately, for student grading purposes, the final paper to come out of the teamwork was carried out and submitted individually. Still, it was not a surprise when most of the written-in comments in student evaluations of my courses identified group work as the least satisfying. Not happy about having to rely on others rather than work independently, one student wrote,

"I don't understand why we had to work in teams. This makes you dependent on someone else and I did not find it necessary in my learning experience."

And another wrote,

"Group projects with online classes are very difficult to coordinate. Many take online classes because they need to work at their own time and at their own pace. Having others depend on them to get work done while behind the anonymity of a computer screen is unfair to those who really care about getting work done and getting it done well."

The aversion to dependence on other students is striking and concerning and yet, from a pure efficiency standpoint, understandable and wholly legitimate. As we all know, collaboration is time intensive and, by definition, takes place outside of individual control. Yet, building digital courses around ideals of developing things like "communities of practice," and "communities of inquiry" at the same time as promoting and valorizing the flexibility and self-learning features of an online education seems to me like an intractable contradiction.

A couple of students said they *did* like the group work in our class. I was pleased for that. *My* most thrilling educational experience was in my dissertation seminar at The Graduate Center given by sociology's sorely missed Bob Alford. There, I lived for three-hours a week with brilliant

student colleagues and a masterful teacher in the most alive experience of the social production of knowledge I've ever known. No other academic experience has come close to giving me such a high--stemming from the profound realization that no one person could have ever--on his or her own--thought the thoughts that emerged and elaborated in that class group. What a rush. Could such a dynamic translate to the digital classroom? I am not so sure. It's difficult to imagine how the real-time frenzy...the *sturm und drang* of collective idea-making could be enacted in the asynchronous format. And so, we're back again at how to humanize--that is, to get the juices of a socially and emotionally emergent intellectual life flowing in the online classroom.



Figure 10. Expertise remodel

3. Authority and Voice

Since I began teaching online, I was given three courses--ready-made to teach. The Research Methods course was brand new, and both the Introduction to Sociology and Writing at Work courses had been recently revised. How relieved I was not to have to create the course in my first semesters of teaching--on top of fumbling to learn the simple mechanics of Blackboard. All the work that went into crafting the course syllabi, assignments, multimedia learning materials, rubrics, site design, etc., was apparent, but I couldn't appreciate the enormity of this effort until I taught the class and worked through the weekly materials over the semester. Because they were new courses (or new versions of old courses), I was asked not to change what was in them. I could tweak, but really, I should pilot them as they were created. I was assured that we would consult during and after the semester about how the courses worked or did not work (and we have).

I was disoriented for quite a while (and still am sometimes) about what exactly I'm doing as a teacher when the course is already set up by someone else. I've had real trouble finding my purpose. (Deserving much greater discussion than I can give here, I think we should be *very* worried about the implications course packaging has for the voice and authority of the growing ranks of part-time instructors.)

More than once it occurred to me that it would be easy to become a technocrat--a fine manager of the course site--clicking tabs to turn links on and off, moving content up and down the page to highlight its place in progressing sequences, and yes, ever-attentive to the perpetual task of adding pictures, cartoons, cheerful seasonal images, etc. Even though "the use of educational media [is meant] to *unite* teacher and learner" [10, p10], I almost felt irrelevant in my own fully loaded course site. There seemed to be no place to put my imprint and my sense of authority was absent. How was I supposed to impart knowledge?



Figure 11. License

I'll look forward to penning my own courses--firstly, a course on Self and Social Interaction which I'll rework this summer; I'm hoping this will allow me to reconnect with the creative license that I miss. Crafting and getting to teach the online version of this upper-level Sociology course promises several pedagogical advantages that are missing, for example, in non-social sciences courses such as the Writing course I have taught. As an academic major which revolves around multiple perspectives and critical thinking--online discussion boards and collaborative work in Sociology courses makes perfect sense. Data support the effectiveness of interactive participation in web-based Sociology courses. [16] Though other disciplines certainly encourage student participation in the form of debate, Sociology is founded on this. It thrives on it. So when I develop the Self & Society course, I plan, for example, to structure debate activities so that students will have to grapple with symbolic interactionist versus exchange theory conceptions of self. Having students use discussion boards to write their thoughts, respond to one another, and sharpen their own critical and analytical understandings of what sociologists means by "self" will make learning sociology in the online environment especially valuable.

In the meantime, I've carved out a space where I try to make a pedagogical difference--mostly in giving detailed feedback, aimed at letting students know I'm interested in

their minds and their ways of putting sociological ideas together. This is a place I feel most connected to students. I feel this type of communication to be very personal. Indeed, it is the *kind* of personal I want in my teaching life. In light of all hoopla around forging learning communities online, it is ironic that my most satisfying interactions so far are in the highly individualized (and private) acts of giving feedback. I keep thinking I'm doing something wrong. I'm clearly still weaving into my online teaching a thick strand of my more traditional orientation to students as solitary learners.



Figure 12. (Dis)Connection

5. Conclusion

Cathy Davidson and David Goldberg, [4] authors of *The Future of Thinking: Learning Institutions in a Digital Age*, asks us to consider *why* a professor would stand at the front of the classroom? Viewing the impact of changing technologies on human interaction and social arrangements through a trans-historical lens, Davidson and Goldberg question teacher authority and believe we should too--not because teacher authority is a bad thing, per se, but because they believe it might be outdated. In conventional learning institutions, the lines of authorship and authority are clearly delineated, they note, and the place of teacher, student, and technology are well known. But with digital learning, conventional modes of authority break down. They write:

"...the relative horizontality of access to the Web has flattened out contributions to knowledge making, making them much less the function of a credentialed elite and increasingly collaboratively created. What are the implications of this dual horizontality—of access and contribution—for learning, then?" [4, p53]

Davidson and Goldberg [4] hold the view that the future of learning in the digital era is in the students' hands. From the earliest moments children figure out online possibilities through adulthood, they are engaged in non-hierarchical,

peer-to-peer self-learning. Our cognitive hard-wiring is being reconfigured by digital technology, transforming learning apparatus and style. From this vantage point, to be learning *is* to be social.

Sherry Turkle, renowned M.I.T. scholar of social relations and technology referenced earlier, is nervous. While she is also convinced that computers are changing the way we think, her larger concern expressed in the book, *Alone Together* [12] is that the computer is changing the way we *feel*. It's the *way* of being social that she finds troubling. She writes:

"...[T]he computer we have created [is] a very powerful object, an object that offers the illusion of companionship without the demands of intimacy, an object that allows you to be a loner and yet never be alone. In this sense, computers add a new dimension to the power of the traditional teddy bear or security blanket." [12, p45]

And so we circle back to the central project of this paper--that is, to explore the question of how--as a neophyte online teacher, long seasoned in face-to-face instruction--to imagine humanizing the digital classroom in ways that matter to our professional mission, not as technicians or impression managers, but as educators. I think it only fitting to end this largely anecdotal and personal essay with a bit of empirical data.

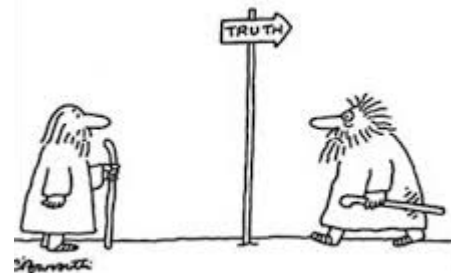


Figure 13. Education

In 2012, Driscoll, et al. [5] published findings in *Teaching Sociology* from their study assessing the differences in student performance and satisfaction in online and face-to-face settings. Data were collected from 368 students enrolled in three online and three face-to-face sections of an introductory-level sociology course. Controlling for selection effects, the research findings showed no significant difference--when online courses are designed using pedagogically sound practices, the authors assert, they may provide equally effective learning environments.

Of course, this is good news--fairly good news, anyway. It's nice to know that in the emerging body of literature on the merits of online teaching in sociology, we're doing no worse (but perhaps no better) than we would be doing in the

classroom. It's difficult to get too excited, however, not because on its own terms the study falls short in any way in its methodological rigor. It falls short, instead, because the metric for some of the most crucial aspects of learning are not countable. How could a survey measure the intellectual gusto felt and forever remembered by students in Bob Alford's seminar? Similarly, how could Likert-scale questionnaire items capture the gestalt of on-line discussion board interaction? As we went our way through strategies for humanizing our digital classrooms, let's not forget to do so with our research.

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