

Creating An “Invitational Classroom” In The Online Educational Milieu

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ABSTRACT

Parker Palmer, a scholar who studied effective face-to-face teaching, introduced the term the “invitational classroom” (1993, p. 71). In particular Palmer emphasized that “an air of hospitality” facilitated an inviting educational environment (p. 71). Hospitality in Palmer’s words means “receiving each other, our struggles, our newborn ideas, with openness and care” (p. 74). Palmer concludes that both teachers and learners experience positive consequence when the class environment is invitational. This paper explores a category of innovative teaching strategies, called artistic pedagogical technologies (APTs) that facilitate the experience of an invitational classroom in online courses (Perry & Edwards, 2010). APTs are teaching strategies founded in the arts. APTs described in this paper include photovoice, parallel poetry, and conceptual quilting. A study of the effect of these APTs on graduate students and instructors from a Canadian online university is described. The data collection and data analysis processes used in the study are detailed. Both students and instructors found the online classroom environment changed in a positive way in part because of APTs. Research participants reported that APTs initiated, sustained, and enhanced interactions among students and between students and the instructors (Perry & Edwards, 2010). These findings are analyzed using Palmer’s concepts of hospitality and the invitational classroom and Wenger’s Social Theory of Learning (1990). Practical ideas for educators regarding the use of APTs in teaching and course design are reviewed.

Keywords: Online Education; Artistic Pedagogical Technologies; Photovoice; Parallel Poetry; Conceptual Quilting; Online Learning; Online Interaction; Parker Palmer; Hospitality; Invitational Classroom; Wenger’s Social Theory of Learning

INTRODUCTION

Parker Palmer (1993) concluded one of the essential dimensions of successful teaching in the traditional face-to-face milieu is “an air of hospitality” which helps create an “invitational classroom” (p. 71). Hospitality in Palmer’s words means “receiving each other, our struggles, our newborn ideas, with openness and care” (p. 74). According to Palmer, when participants in face-to-face teaching and learning are engaged in this way, there are positive consequences for instructors and students. We believe that online educational environments can also be invitational and that particular teaching strategies can facilitate this.

The purpose of this paper is to explore a category of innovative teaching strategies that enable hospitality and an invitational classroom in online courses. The teaching strategies described are called artistic pedagogical technologies (APTs) (Perry & Edwards, 2010). APTs are a collection of teaching activities founded in the arts. They are teaching activities that employ literary, visual, musical, or drama elements. APTs are distinguished from more conventional educational strategies in part by their emphasis on aesthetics and their link to creativity. Examples of APTs described in this paper are photovoice, parallel poetry, and conceptual quilting. APTs are non-graded and optional. However, participation is almost 100 percent.

The authors recently completed a study of the effects of APTs in 3 online graduate courses in a large Canadian distance education university. Both students and instructors participating in the study found the online classroom environment changed in a positive way, in part, because of the APTs. Data collection for this study

continued over one semester (4 months). The instructors' perspectives regarding the effects of APTs were collected during one-to-one telephone interviews and a virtual focus group that included 3 instructors as a convenience sample. Interviews and focus group comments were transcribed. Forty-six students consented to participate in the study. This convenience sample of students completed a questionnaire that elicited qualitative data regarding how APTs influenced the online course milieu.

All data collected were saved to a word processing program and systematically analysed using a process similar to narrative analysis (Priest, Roberts, & Woods, 2003). Specifically, the data were read several times by each research team member; fragments of sentences or groups of sentences expressing a key idea were highlighted; and these ideas were grouped to identify core themes. The discovery of the themes was aided by using three points of reference; recurrence of ideas within the narrative data (ideas that have same meaning but different wording); repetition (the existence of the same ideas using the same wording); and forcefulness (verbal or nonverbal cues that reinforce a concept) (Owen, 1984).

In brief, both instructors and students reported that APTs initiated, sustained, and enhanced interactions among students and between students and the instructors (Perry & Edwards, 2010). In the discussion section of this paper we analyze these findings using Palmer's concepts of hospitality and the invitational classroom. To further understanding of why APTs had positive effects on interaction in the online class, findings are also considered using Wenger's Social Theory of Learning (1990).

This paper will be of interest to college and university faculty who currently teach online or blended courses, or who may teach online in the future. The paper concludes with a discussion regarding how APT's can be successfully introduced into existing online courses or added during course design.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE APTS OF PHOTOVOICE, PARALLEL POETRY AND CONCEPTUAL QUILTING

APTs described in this paper include photovoice, parallel poetry, and conceptual quilting. Each strategy is described and an example provided.

Photovoice. Photovoice was originally a participatory-action research method. Wang and Burris used photographs to elicit, bring forth, and draw out responses from participants on issues related to their health and community needs (1997). Through this use of photovoice as a research method, participants were enabled to reflect and effectively communicate their perceptions and insights (Wang, 1999).

Perry (2006) transformed the photovoice research method into a teaching strategy for online instruction. In the photovoice teaching technology the instructor posts a digital photographic image for the class at the beginning of each unit of an online course. Each purposefully selected image is accompanied by a reflective question posed by the instructor. Students are encouraged to view the photograph, consider the question, and contribute to an online discussion forum provided specifically for the photovoice activity. A different image and question are posted at the beginning of each unit of a course. An example of a photovoice activity used in a course called Teaching Health Professionals can be viewed in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Example of a Photovoice APT

Photovoice Question: What does this image say to you about transformative learning as opposed to informative learning? Post your thoughts in the Photovoice Forum.



Parallel Poetry. In parallel poetry the instructor provides an example poem on a topic related to the course content. This poem can be of any type. Haiku, ode, limerick, narrative and couplet poems have been used successfully for this APT. The example poem is usually written by the instructor although a published poem could be used if the theme of the poem corresponds with the course content. Students are invited by the instructor to create their own poem after reading the example poem. The poem written by the student is to parallel the structure of the demonstration poem and reflect a specified course theme. An example of a teacher constructed poem and a student’s parallel poem on the topic of educational philosophy can be viewed in figure 2.

Figure 2 – Example of a Parallel Poetry APT

Parallel Poetry Activity

Directions – Try this learning activity called parallel poetry. First read an example poem I wrote called “I am your nurse.” Then you will see the first lines of a poem called “I am your teacher.” Using my poem as inspiration, develop your own poem making your poem reflective of your teaching philosophy. What did you learn about teaching and about yourself in this course that you could share in a poem that parallels the “I am your nurse” poem? Use the first few lines provided to begin your parallel poem.

I AM YOUR NURSE

I am your nurse.
I ease your pain.
I bathe your skin.
I make your bed.
I rub your back.
I meet your needs.
You heal me.

I am your nurse.
I feed you meals.
I give you rest.
I tend your wounds.
I sense your suffering.
I answer your questions.
You teach me. (Perry, 2009)

Write a parallel poem that describes your teaching philosophy. You might start your poem like this:

I AM YOUR TEACHER (note the second poem is a different font than the first font – and both are part of the example)

I answer your questions,
I challenge your mind,
I...

An example of a student parallel poem taken from one of the courses included in this study is provided.

I AM YOUR TEACHER

I answer your questions,
I challenge your mind,
I have high expectations,
I want more from you,
I want more for you.

I applaud your successes,
I empathize with your difficulties,
I am your cheering section,
I watch you,
I watch out for you,
I see all of you.
I am proud of your accomplishments.

I will help you overcome your hurdles,
I hear you,
I listen to you,
I learn from you,
I learn about you,
I learn about myself through you.

Poems are effective teaching strategies in part because they require writers to understand the topic before they can write a poem about it. According to van Manen (1990) poems are the perfect medium for giving voice to those topics that are abstract and complex such as aspects of human interaction. Examples of these abstract topics include compassion, human connection, motivation, inspiration, and caring, topics that are often part of nursing and other human services curricula. Loosely paraphrased van Manen (1990) said that poems help to expose the tacit and unspoken within the limitation of words. Importantly, poems do not require summaries. Poems are routes for the communication of the essence of topics that are difficult to write about including personal beliefs, values, and philosophies.

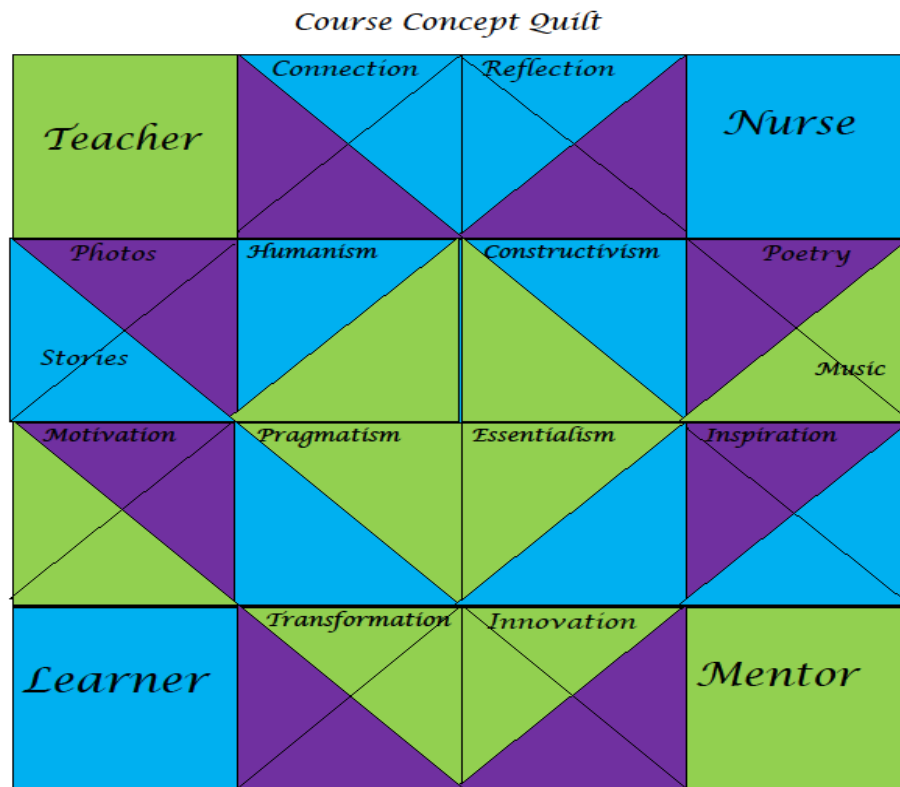
Conceptual Quilting. Conceptual quilting was developed by the authors and was used in the courses studied as a summary activity. Students are asked to construct a virtual quilt that is comprised of ideas, metaphors, theories, and other details from the course that they found most meaningful. The “quilt” needs to be in a medium that can be shared electronically with the class. Students often use a PowerPoint slide or web-page to prepare and present their quilts.

Conceptual quilting is an effective review or summary activity because to construct the conceptual quilt learners need to review and reflect on the course materials. Further interaction with the instructor and other students in the course occur when students post their quilts to an asynchronous online discussion forum. The sharing of quilts often results in a resurgence of dialogue among classmates around a course theme that is depicted in one of the quilts. Students commented that conceptual quilting helped them consolidate their learning and bring closure to the

course. From a social interactive perspective, the sharing of the completed quilts is a way for students to acknowledge the impact that others (teachers and peers) have had on their learning. Figure 3 demonstrates the conceptual quilting APT and an example of a conceptual quilt is provided.

Figure 3 – The Conceptual Quilting APT

Directions - Construct a conceptual quilt that comprises the ideas, metaphors, theories and other details from the course that were the most personally meaningful to you. Post this pictorial representation of your own experience with the course materials, classmates, and the instructor, in the conceptual quilt forum. The medium used for your conceptual quilt is your choice but please use a format that can be shared with the class electronically.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS OF APT STUDY

Research participants, both instructors and students, reported that APTs initiated, sustained, and enhanced interactions among students, and between students and the instructors (Perry & Edwards, 2010). Each theme is presented and examples provided.

APTs as initiator of interactions. Photovoice, parallel poetry and conceptual quilting were described by the students as engaging activities that caught their attention because they were different than the online learning activities with which they were familiar. One student commented that even the names of the activities, photovoice, parallel poetry, and conceptual quilting, caused her to take a second look at the activity in the online course and then motivated her to participate. Another participant commented that APTs were innovative and thus a “hook” that engaged her in both the activity and eventually in other aspects of the course. (space missing between paragraphs?)

Interaction with classmates was initiated when students engaged in APTs. For example, what a student responded to a photovoice image often revealed something about the responder. The values, hobbies, and perspectives of the responder were often revealed through their photovoice response. In this way, learners exposed aspects of themselves to one another, and this familiarity seemed to trigger interactions. Likewise, the poems and quilts written and designed by students, were infused with their personalities making them more well-known to classmates and instructors. When classmates become known to one another, more common ground is recognized. This becomes the foundation for further interaction.

APTs as sustainer of interactions. The APTs also helped to sustain interactions among students, and between students and instructors. For example, when students engaged in a photovoice activity related to a unit of the course they often referred back to what was shared during online conversations in previous units. In this way stories and comments shared during photovoice became the basis or scaffolding upon which further interactions were built. As a result, subsequent interactions became richer, more insightful, and more intimate as the course progressed.

Beyond student-student interactions, instructor-student interaction was also sustained by the APTs. The parallel poem was particularly effective for sustaining these relationships. As described earlier, instructors either wrote an original poem or used a poem they appreciated as the poem students used as the template for their parallel poems. In this way instructors were able to effectively and appropriately share some of their values, priorities, and perspectives with students. The instructor poem became an avenue for instructors to become known to learners. In other words the virtual instructors became more “real” to students when they revealed something of themselves through their poetry. Students are more likely to ask questions and share comments (in other words interact) with online instructors who have become more well-known to them. When participants are more familiar to one another, and have developed a history because of previous interactions, they may also become more comfortable sharing their perspectives in an honest and open way. Interactions are sustained when this sense of familiarity and resulting trust is established within the group.

APTs as an enhancer of interactions. Finally, APTs were viewed by students and instructors as activities that enhanced the quality of their interactions with one another. APTs generated a sense of excitement in the online course. The energy created by these novel learning activities propelled students and instructors to become more fully engaged with the course content. Students commented that because of photovoice generated discussions they were motivated to read beyond the required course materials to be equipped to contribute even more meaningful postings on course topics. Instructors also reported seeking further insights by researching additional resources to share with students on photovoice topics. This extra background research and reflection, participated in by both students and instructors, often resulted in a high calibre discussion and more quality interaction.

The novel nature of APTs brought students to the course in a timely manner. In the courses used in the study, students could participate in the online learning activities for a given unit of the course anytime during the week assigned to that unit. In other words, participation was asynchronous, but took place over one week. Instructors found that when they included APTs in the learning activities of the course students were eager to see what interesting APT activity was available each week. As a result of their interest, students logged into the course early during the course week. One instructor said if student were expecting a photovoice activity each Monday students were often logged into the course awaiting her posting. The critical mass of students would begin discussion on the topic of the week early in the week when APTs were used. Further, students were motivated to log back into the course several times during the course week to see what others had written in response to the APT. Simply having students engage early in the course week, and check into the course more often during a course week, precipitated more interactions. This also resulted in more time to develop conversations around a given topic creating discussions that were potentially more analytical and complex as students were moved to delve deeper.

APTS AND PALMER’S CONCEPTS OF HOSPITALITY AND THE INVITATIONAL CLASSROOM

To Palmer teachers and learners experience positive consequences when the face-to-face classroom is perceived as invitational. The invitational tone is facilitated at least in part by an air of hospitality (1993). In what ways do APTs contribute to the development of an invitational classroom in the online educational environment? (space missing between paragraphs?)

As noted in the findings, APTs contributed to a positive tone in online courses. APTs were perceived by students as novel and interesting and the presence of these activities generated a sense of excitement. In Palmer's (1993) words, these unique learning activities invited participation. Students were welcomed to each unit with a new APT and expressed that this was "something special" that was offered to them by their instructors. In the same way a hostess might open the door and present guests with a warm smile and sociable greeting, an APT such as photovoice placed at the very beginning of each unit may have been seen by students as being this friendly greeting from the teacher.

Second, the APTs were noted to provide an avenue for students and instructors to get to know more about one another. For example, values, interests, perspectives, hobbies, and stories were shared appropriately in response to a photovoice image. The poems posted by instructors were of their own making or selected because they had meaning for the teacher. Students could read the poems and come to know more about their online instructors. Likewise, the poems constructed by students to parallel the teacher poems revealed much about each learner. It seems that if a classroom is going to feel "invitational" participants need to become known to one another in an authentic way. APTs helped to facilitate this.

Learning environments that reflect hospitality invite the open sharing of new ideas. APTs invite learners to take risks and share at least their preliminary thoughts and reflections without a lot of filters and second-guessing. Students are not graded on APT responses, they are told that they do not need to do the required readings prior to making responses, and there are no "correct" responses. This seems to take away anxiety and provide respondents with a channel to let their thoughts and ideas surface. An invitational milieu welcomes these embryotic notions and as a community the ideas can be carefully crafted into more well-developed, evidence-supported conceptions.

Finally, hospitality includes a sense that people care about one another. The hospitality values of altruism, trust, and compassion surface in online courses where APTs are used. The interactions among students and between students and the instructor that were initiated, sustained, and enhanced by APTs helped to establish a sense of community in the online course. As people became more known to one another, their interactions seemed to become more authentic. They gradually shared their perspectives in a more open and honest way. In a way they began to care about one another which was evident in the tone of their postings. For example, students shared stories of their life events as they related to the photovoice images. Follow-up comments from other students included words of support, encouragement and kindness. The tone of the course gradually evolved to be a comfortable gathering place. Students openly shared ideas and challenged themselves, and others, to reach new levels of understanding.

CONSIDERING APTS IN LIGHT OF WENGER'S SOCIAL THEORY OF LEARNING

According to Wenger's social theory of learning, people are social beings who pursue learning goals to become competent and find meaning in this experience (Wenger, 2009). To Wenger, learning results when students participate in communities of practice (COP) (2009). For this to be achieved, participants in the learning community must mutually engage, connect, and relate to one another through actions worth pursuing.

Openshaw, Schultz and Millington (2008) describe COP as having three elements; people, outcomes, and tools. The people in COP come to have mutually defining identities, styles, and inside understandings which denote membership. The outcomes of COP can include sustained mutual relationships as well as rapid flow of information and sharing of knowledge. COP tools include any item/activity utilized by the group to identify problems, solve problems, communicate, or complete a project (Openshaw, et. al., 2008).

APTs may contribute to forming COP needed for social learning. First, participation in photovoice, conceptual quilting, and parallel poetry help the people in the learning community share their individual perspectives, values, and beliefs and in so doing the development of shared identity is possible. Through the interactions triggered, sustained, and enhanced by APTs, shared identities are developed and inside understandings increased. Second, the quality interactions stimulated by APTs may contribute to the outcomes of COP as described by Openshaw et. al. (2008). Specifically, relationships among learners and between the learner and instructor, are developed and evolve into sustained effective associations over the life of the course. APTs are avenues of information sharing and the resulting analysis of thoughts and ideas often contributes to the development of new

knowledge and understandings. Third, APTs are tools of COPs in that they assist group members to communicate their unique perspectives in relation to course content in a safe and appropriate way. Once communication channels are opened by APTs, they are sustained and enhanced by further engagement related to course content.

In sum, APTs may assist a class to initiate and sustain a COP. These activities go beyond simply being a catalyst for group members to share their thoughts and opinions. The open sharing by one student participating in a photovoice, quilt, or poem causes others to reciprocate and share their perspectives. Bonds and alliances may be triggered. Additionally, when diverse perspectives are honestly shared, group members may change their views or see a bigger picture perspective. In this way, diverse views come to be respected and valued. Since APTs provide legitimate avenues worth pursuing they can be a first step in creating relationships necessary for the development of a COP. Further, the discussion resulting from APTs can lead to meaningful rapid exchanges of information and knowledge and lead to substantive and meaningful dialogue which is the foundation of learning.

INTEGRATING APTS INTO TEACHING AND COURSE DESIGN

APT's can be successfully introduced into existing online courses or added during course design. There are at least four reasons why this is the case. APTs are simple, broadly applicable, require minimal technology, and are inexpensive. For example, to establish a photovoice activity the instructor needs to locate an image that is illustrative of a concept in the course. Digital images are readily available. Most instructors have access to their own collection of images. Students prefer to have teachers provide images from their own photo collections as the images allow students to get to know their instructors on a more personal level. One student commented that having the instructor post an image that she had taken each week was like "looking at the artwork in the instructors' home." Students appreciated getting to know about their instructors. This was possible when instructor generated images were used in photovoice. If teachers do not have their own images there are open source images available online. Add a challenging reflective question to the selected image and a photovoice APT is ready to insert into an online course.

Conceptual quilt APTs are equally simple, can be adapted for most subject areas, require minimal technology and are inexpensive. To add a conceptual quilting activity to an online course, instructors only need describe what a conceptual quilt might look like and the goal of the quilting activity in relation to the course learning outcomes. Providing an example quilt may stimulate creative quilt development. Inviting students to post their quilts in a public forum within an online course is a way to further the sharing of ideas and the development of COPs. Students can use any electronic medium to produce and share their quilts.

Finally, parallel poetry APTs require instructors to source a poem that is reflective of course content or to write a poem. The poem can be of any type. To be meaningful the poem needs to be carefully selected or crafted to be clearly relevant to the course theme. The instructor poem is posted with an explanation regarding the students' role in the parallel poetry activity. Early adopters who post their poems in a public forum inside the course will trigger other students to attempt the activity.

CONCLUSION

Online teaching strategies founded in the arts such as photovoice, parallel poetry, and conceptual quilting can help to create what Palmer called the "invitational classroom" (1993, p. 71). Interactions among students, and between students and instructors, initiated, sustained, and enhanced by APTs further the experience of hospitality in online classrooms. The effectiveness of APTs in online courses has positive consequences for students but also for instructors. The simplicity, broad applicability, minimal technology requirements, and inexpensive nature of the APTs make them accessible to those who teach and design online courses. The incorporation of APTs in online courses can help create learning environments that radiate hospitality and help to precipitate the creation of COPs.

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