Constructing learning spaces: What we can learn from studies of informal learning online

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Abstract

A report from the market research firm Ambient Insight indicated that by 2015, 25 million post-secondary students in the United States could be enrolled in an online course (Adkins, 2011). As a consequence, they argued, we will see a decline in student enrollment in physical classrooms. In fact, the report estimated a five-year decline of 22 percent (from 14.4 million in 2010 to 4.1 million in 2015) in students attending traditional classrooms. Yet, in the face of these projections and despite innovation in educational technologies, there remains a consistent number of academics who are concerned that the quality of online instruction is not equal to face-to-face (f2f) encounters (Allen & Seaman, 2011). It is this question—a question of learning and how to facilitate high quality experiences—that we take up in this article. This question forces us to consider simultaneously: 1) what are the conditions that are necessary for learning to occur in online spaces, and 2) what are the best practices associated with effective learning these environments? To these ends, we focus on the characteristics of digital informal learning environments and on how these environments are constructed rhetorically and primarily discursively via deliberate facilitation strategies focused on encouraging learning.
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A report to the Sloan Consortium prepared by Elaine I. Allen and Jeff Seaman (2011) found that over 6.1 million college students took at least one online course during the fall 2010 term. This was a 20 percent increase from the number reported in 2003, when the organization first started tracking these statistics in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2003,2011). Other studies have supported this growing trend across higher education institutions, especially at community colleges (Quan-Haase, 2005; Kim & Bonk, 2006; Annetta, Folta, & Klesath, 2010; Instructional Technology Council, 2012). Neither online learning nor technological innovation is new. Those of us with a sense of history (or who are simply old enough and possessed of good memories) can readily note many parallels to earlier distance learning technologies like educational television and correspondence courses (Miller, 2001b). However, there may be reason to consider the fact that the distribution, penetration, and creativity of computer networks and services make the present historical moment different. A report from the market research firm Ambient Insight indicated that by 2015, 25 million post-secondary students in the United States could be enrolled in an online course (Adkins, 2011).

As a consequence, they argued, we will see a decline in student enrollment in physical classrooms. In fact, the report estimated a five-year decline of 22 percent (from 14.4 million in 2010 to 4.1 million in 2015) in students attending traditional classrooms. Yet, in the face of these projections and despite innovation in educational technologies, there remains a consistent number of academics who are concerned that the quality of online instruction is not equal to face to face (f2f) encounters (Allen & Seaman, 2011). It is this question—a question of learning and how to facilitate high quality experiences—that we take up in this article. This question forces us to consider simultaneously: 1) what are the conditions that are necessary for learning to occur in online spaces, and 2) what are the best practices associated with effective learning these environments? It is our hope that addressing these questions will reveal what informal online learning can teach us about writing pedagogy and writing instruction.

Having declared our intentions in this way, we situate our argument outside of a writing classroom. We draw from our study of facilitating learning in online museum environments. Here we join the long-standing tradition of research on informal learning environments, particularly museum environments, within *Computers and Composition* scholarship (Morrison, 2011). Palmyre Pierroux and Synne Skjulstad (2011) have argued that more and more, museums turn to online environments to sustain their brand and cultivate their identity. Similarly, Dagny Stuedahl and Ole Smørdal (2011) pointed out that the use of social media in museums can enhance a visitors' experience with exhibits, yielding new, interactive, and participatory learning opportunities. Our study not only builds on these concepts but also focuses more directly on how digital environments and social media can be used as informal learning spaces. Not only that, but we are also interested in describing how these learning spaces are rhetorically constructed through the act of facilitation. In our study, we identified and then tested facilitation techniques that we believed helped construct an environment in which valuable outcomes like learning could happen. These techniques were mostly writing moves that could be taught and learned.

Online environments are always constructed—a claim that is not new to this audience—but our argument focuses on a question that is much less clear: how are (discursively) productive learning environments constructed? Any online learning environment, including classes in which learning to become a better writer is the focus, requires a form of rhetorical work that we call "facilitation" in this piece. In what follows, we focus on learning with respect to the (digital) environment itself and on how that environment is constructed (rhetorically and primarily discursively).

1. Characteristics of informal learning environments

Most of the attention in education research has focused on the study of formal learning environments (i.e., classrooms). Within these settings, the classroom becomes the locus where knowledge is built and learning happens. Regardless of whether the pedagogical strategies are student-centered or teacher-centered, the approach to learning focuses on a scaffolded, planned activity connected to curricular goals and outcomes. Formal classrooms, however, are not the only settings where people learn. People—including our students, of course—learn in a variety of informal locales that frame their everyday experiences (e.g., home, science museum, nature center, coffee shop). In fact, as John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking (2010) have pointed out, most of what and how we learn happens outside of formal learning contexts, yet we still lack adequate understandings of what learning looks like in informal spaces and what support is necessary to promote learning. For the purposes of this article, we define *informal learning* as an approach to learning that is not typically classroom-based, relatively unstructured, and places the control of learning (e.g., needs and interests) in the hands of the learner (see Schauble, Leinhardt, & Martin, 1997; Falk & Dierking, 2002).

Our definition is useful to distinguishing between formal and informal learning environments, but it is not sufficient. It is also necessary to understand informal learning by attending to the learners who seek these environments. Informal learners often approach learning situations with commitments, relationships, motivations, and tasks that are very different from those present in classrooms. For example, individuals often learn about science outside of the classroom to satisfy short-term personal needs rather than long-term cultural or civic duties, or because they want to succeed in school (Falk, Storksdieck, & Dierking, 2007, p. 455). The diverse and varied needs and motivations of learners, then, drive the ways in which learning environments are understood and constructed, and so it is the nature of learners themselves that allow us to make formal/informal distinctions. According to a report by the Committee on Learning Science in Informal Environments (Bell, Lewenstein, Shouse, & Feder, 2009), there are six interrelated strands that best describe what learning can look like in informal settings: learners 1) are motivated to learn because the nature of informal learning is driven primarily by learners' interests and excitement; 2) readily generate, understand and adopt concepts related to science; 3) make sense of the world through scientific inquiry practices (i.e., testing, manipulating, predicting,