

## Computer-mediated teaching and the human face of learning: essential tensions or contradiction?

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Many institutions of higher learning have embraced computer-mediated teaching methods and there is continued pressure on instructors to engage in the latest teaching technology. Most recently, we have witnessed a proliferation of on-line courses in both distance education and traditional classroom settings. There is still surprisingly little critical comment on the nature of these learning environments although a backlash against computer-mediated teaching is apparent. Many institutions are at a critical juncture where a division is emerging between on-line course delivery (with its particular pedagogy) and the human interactions of the more 'traditional' university experience. How do we enhance the human face of teaching and learning in relation to computer-mediated processes? How do we avoid 'throwing out the baby with the bath water' in an 'anti-technology' backlash?

### Introduction

Over the past decade we have seen the computer-mediated teaching environment shift from specialised laboratory environments in such disciplines as modern languages, music, and geosciences towards more generally-available learning situations in our own classrooms, independent of disciplines. We have moved from having small components of a course, such as specific exercises, operating through computer networks to now having entire courses operating on the web, complete with interactive testing and automatic grade submission. We now expect students to communicate by email, to submit assignments electronically, and to check the course web pages for components of the course syllabus and evaluation scheme. Some of us experiment with entirely paperless courses where everything is

provided in some form of electronic medium. Some set up parallel teaching environments intended to complement class time. And while most would argue that these teaching technologies have been applied appropriately, there are those who continue - rightly - to ask critical questions. And there are still others for whom these forms of teaching technologies have obfuscated the essential human interactions of the academy.

### Computer-mediated environments: falling into line online and becoming 'technologically literate'

Perhaps you are fired up about applying the latest technologies to your teaching. Perhaps you have a teaching development office that encourages and rewards the use of computer-mediated learning. Perhaps

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‘innovative’ is somehow equated with ‘technology.’ Perhaps you’ve never touched this computer-mediated stuff at all and have no intention of doing so - but are now faced with continuous pressure to fall into line online, to get on board, get up to speed, and a host of other sales pitches encouraging you to explore the opportunities which seem so obvious to the “technologically literate.” And there are other pressures in the innovator/adopter/laggard sequence: What do my head of department and dean think of this stuff? Is my annual performance evaluation going to be affected? Are tenure and promotion in jeopardy because my courses are not available on the web?

Whatever your individual responses to these questions, as a group, we as members of the professoriate, as instructional learning officers and development staff, have worked hard to create a plethora of computer-mediated teaching environments. In a recent article in *University Affairs*, Tema Frank (2001) notes that it is not just distance education that has embraced computer-mediated learning but that traditional course delivery on our own campuses, in our own classes, now makes extensive use of web pages, bulletin boards, electronic discussion groups, and email. Increasingly, we are seeing some element of online learning in our regularly assigned teaching. Below, I suggest the need for a more critical look at the intersection of computer mediated teaching and the ‘human face’ of learning associated with our traditional perspectives on the nature of the university.

### ‘Roadkill on the information superhighway’

The Canadian Association of University Teachers Bulletin has been a particularly interesting source of critical comment on computer-mediated teaching over the past year. While some of this discussion appears motivated by concern with pedagogy, it’s clear also that some of the disquiet results from a perception of the connections between the implementation of computer technology and the restructuring of funding regimes within university education. Critics

have argued that some academic institutions have embraced information and communication technologies as ways of reducing operating expenses and revitalising course delivery; seeing online courses as cash cows generating tuition revenues without the need to provide classrooms. The ‘products’ of traditional courses can be seen as readily-convertible commodities for sale to online student consumers.

Further, Tremblay (2001) ponders why we still have great difficulty getting past the ‘gee whiz’ effect of our teaching technologies, and urges that we should spend more time analysing ‘mediation’ rather than ‘technology.’ In other words, technology must not be an end in itself - presumably we use it to teach more effectively but we are woefully short of real analysis of what this means. Tremblay identifies also some disturbing elements of adopting computer-mediated teaching, not least of which is the suggestion that it is in danger of becoming a cultural phenomenon complete with its own mechanisms of social coercion - including covert and overt suggestions that to not be part of the computer-mediated teaching culture renders one out of touch, or as Tremblay puts it, ‘roadkill on the information superhighway’.

### Learning from the Luddite within us and moving to better informed perspectives

Many of the negative comments made above reflect concern at the glorification of a particular set of technologies, with a particular set of learning processes, without adequate investigation of pedagogy. We need to move beyond these, especially to our own disciplinary experiences in order to explore the potential for enhancing our students’ learning experiences.

There are further issues to raise here briefly for the use of web-based teaching technologies. First is the question of proprietary rights. Whose material is it on the web? How do we define ownership, on the part of both student and instructor. The second issue is related and is what I refer to as the sanctity and authority of text. A

number of years ago we were very concerned that the web would become the 'great digital dumpster', a place of unmediated information. Many of us feared that our students, raised on a media diet of 30 second soundbites with correspondingly short attention spans, would engage information on the web as an incoherent process, skimming over fragmented material and contributing similarly disjointed and poorly contextualized writing to the quasi-intellectual maelstrom. Notions of sustained argument within a finely crafted text would be replaced with casual informality. My experiences with using the web in my teaching do not support this dystopian view. Instead, I'm heartened to see students acknowledging that their web postings need to conform to the same quality control and conventions of other academic writing. In other words, it is an extension of our traditional teaching processes. I remain optimistic and note that there is much excellent academic content in our online journals and in computer-mediated writing that helps to preserve the sanctity of the text in our web-based teaching environments.

In addition to the web, and so often overlooked, email is now a vital part of our computer-mediated teaching. For many of us it has replaced formal office hours or has at least cut down on this element of direct student contact. We must continue to question its use, however. It is rather ironic that we use it to reduce student contact, to

cut down on the time we spend in face to face dialogue, when it is these human interactions that we value as teachers.

## **The humanity of the academy: lessons from computer-mediated teaching?**

People still matter. The computer mediated environment has not succeeded in replacing class time for most traditional on-campus courses. I doubt that many of us ever intended it to do so. Despite some of the fears alluded to in the literature cited earlier, my personal experience does not suggest that it was intended as a time saver, a space saver, a solution to a student numbers game or the lack of suitable classroom space. Rather, it has functioned as an extension into some new approaches, improved the flexibility of our discussion and the mechanisms of involvement and empowerment for students. There are many elements of learning that are enhanced in the computer-mediated environment but these highlight the importance of complementary face-to-face human contact, a social pedagogy that reinforces the teaching/learning nexus as a highly flexible dialogue.

There are many institutional issues here also. There is a tension between our perspectives as teachers, keen to encourage the intellectual development of the whole

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person, and the realities of our institutions where student numbers and the allocation of scarce financial resources are significant issues. There is creativity here, though, prompted in part by a reassessment of the human interactions that are fundamental to a view of the university as a place where there is a unity of purpose in the pursuit of knowledge. As teachers, we must keep this point foremost in our minds, particularly as we debate the pressures for online courses, distance education, and the complicated conflation of teaching development with ‘teaching and technology’ which often threatens to dominate our approaches.

Computer-mediated learning has many possibilities but to concentrate on it in isolation and at the expense of enhancing our non-computer-mediated methods narrows our lines of thinking and ultimately reduces our effectiveness as practitioners of higher learning.

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