

Reflections on My Questions for the AECT 2005 Presidential Panel

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My three questions were about online courses: (1) What makes a good online course good? (2) Do those things differ from what makes good face-to-face courses good? and, (3) Do online courses develop “personalities” that might influence the selection and use of effective strategies and activities? Those questions came to mind partly as a result of my work for the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction (ibstpi) in the last nine years concerned with competencies for instructional designers, especially those designing technology intensive learning environments, and more recently competencies for online instructors and learners. These questions also arose in conjunction with online master’s programs in instructional design and technology at Syracuse University and at Florida State University.

The chance to work with ibstpi colleagues in identifying relevant knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that pertain to online learning and instruction was enriching. We examined research, talked with many experienced practitioners, conducted interviews and surveys, and shared our own experiences. I worked with a doctoral student who conducted a qualitative investigation of the practices, perceptions, and approaches of highly experienced online teachers. We investigated; we discussed; we published papers and books – that on which academics thrive.

My experience with regard to the university programs was quite different. In both cases the faculty involved with developing and implementing these programs were enthusiastic and very knowledgeable. However, there was noticeable resistance from those not involved with online learning and instruction – especially in departments that did not make use of online learning in any of its many forms. Skepticism is fine; entrenched and dogmatic resistance is downright discouraging, especially from highly educated colleagues and administrators.

In any case, that context caused me to focus on those three questions. There is a thread running through my questions that suggests that online courses may have many significant things in common with face-to-face courses. As researchers, we have tended to focus more on the differences. That thread of similarity perhaps developed as a practical way to respond to those who regard online teaching as an alien ritual performed by people wearing masks. There is a complementary thread that pertains to quality. Like many others, I would like to do what I do well – at least every now and again. Satisfying that occasional desire for quality requires understanding what is likely to contribute to quality – not only from my perspective but from the perspective of students and those who may employ or work with my students afterwards.

The latter question is really a question of conscience. Stated simply, it comes to this: What good will come from what I am now doing and likely to do tomorrow? After tripping over this question while wondering about in academic darkness, I have come to this conclusion: I do not

know. Not only do I not know what good will come from what I am doing, I do not know in general what will result from what I am doing. Ouch. The truth bites.

I do have an underlying belief, however, that I am willing to share. In Plato's *Protagoras*, Socrates and Protagoras are discussing virtue. Socrates proposes and apparently convinces Protagoras that if one knows what the right thing to do is in a particular situation, then one is compelled to do it; failure to do what is right implies ignorance. The paradox is interesting in its own right, but my concern here is somewhat different. For Socrates, the indication of understanding virtue was based entirely on action or performance. Socrates perhaps introduced the first performance-based criterion for understanding. There is also an implication that there may be a difference between what one says and what one does. Saying the right thing, at least in the cases Socrates considered (most of which involved values and virtue), is not a sufficient indication of understanding; one must also do what is right. In the words of my philosopher professor, O. K. Bouwsma: "Surely your life will show what you think of yourself."

That trip down memory lane may raise all sorts of other issues, such as the nature of values or the value of nature. I only wanted to suggest the general principle that performance is a reliable indication of knowledge in complex problem-solving domains. In order to determine how good any intentional learning situation is, online or otherwise, one might examine performance on representative problems in that domain. Performance is not the only indicator of learning. Learning is a process that occurs over time. Evidence suggests that sustained periods of focused and reflective practice result in improved performance. This would imply that another indication that learning is occurring might be commitment or motivation to continue. While the first measure might be characterized as the hitting-the-target measure, the latter measure might be characterized as the stickiness (stick-to-it) measure. Learning is a sticky business. And academics love to make a mess – this one at least.