Chapter 6

Beginning the Process of Humanizing Online Learning: Two Teachers’ Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers two autoethnographic case studies of two teachers as they report on their journey towards making online learning more authentic, personal and humanized. One teacher is a secondary school technology and applied science teacher, and the other, a tertiary history and literature lecturer. In both cases, an initial reticence and even fear transitions into a journey of discovery into the online format. The importance of technical support, pedagogical support and administrative enthusiasm are seen as vital to a healthy transition to an online learning environment that maximizes its technological advantages. A link is drawn between humanizing the transition for teachers and humanizing the experience for students.

INTRODUCTION

Examining the real-life experiences of teachers in implementing a humanized online learning environment runs parallel to the very purpose of this volume. How to humanize a learning experience can often best be communicated via the narratives of actual teachers grappling with their own experiences, failures and successes in creating a friendlier learning environment for their students. Two Australian case studies provide contextual examples, from both secondary and tertiary education settings, of the challenges and solutions in making online education personalized. Therefore, the question being asked

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in this research is: What are the real life experiences of teachers in attempting to humanize the online learning experiences of their students?

It is easy to forget that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are still relatively young, and as pointed out by Madden, Nunes, McPherson, Ford, Miller and Rico (2005), it is worth being reminded how “recently ICT has become commonplace within education and how exaggerated expectations have led to undue pessimism” (p. 20). Madden et al. 2005) go on to discuss the skills gap between children and their parents, and between students and many teachers, depending on their age and their policy of ICT adoption. It is a fact that a large proportion of teachers still struggle in the application of information technology into their learning programs (Rienties, Brouwer & Lygo-Baker, 2013).

This study adopts an autoethnographic, journal-format case study framework in order to analyze the subjective experiences of two teachers, as a complementary research method to the more objective, quantitative reports which characterize many other studies in this volume, and one which embodies the humanizing process which is the subject of this book. According to Yin (2003), case study methodology is used to provide answers to “how” and “why” questions. Cousin (2005) adds to this description: “Case study research aims to explore and depict a setting with a view to advancing understanding” (p. 421).

The two people who are the focus in this study are reflecting on “how” they experienced the adoption of online learning within the culture of their workplace. Their stories help to answer “why” events unfolded like they did and “what” could be put in place to humanize online learning for students. Their experiences make a strong link between humanizing the learning environment for the academics charged with the task of creating quality online products, and humanizing the experience for the students.

Traditionally, case study research presents actual examples from real life, providing multiple discussion points emanating from the cases, and enabling the reader to relate to the scenario (Kardos & Smith, 1979). In this study of online learning and teaching, clearly there are two different types of learning environments for the teachers and these need to be analyzed. Questions such as: “How and why did this situation evolve?” are asked, and enough detail provided to enable the reader to relate to each case.

While asking the how and why questions is vital, this study goes beyond the superficial, and studies the humans involved in the case studies presented. It employs a more humanized form of case study methodology which considers the emotive reactions of the people in the study, and the cultural context of the scenarios. This takes these case studies into the realm of ethnography. These two methodologies traditionally fit well together. As pointed out by Byrne and Ragin (2009): “Ethnographic research has long been synonymous with case studies, typically conceived of as grounded in the local and situated in specific, well-defined and self-contained social contexts” (p. 291).

This chapter considers the experiences of two teachers embedded in two very different scenarios. One is female and one male, and one is in a leadership position and the other is not. One institution is secondary and one is tertiary, and one is proactive and supportive, while the other lacks systematic support for the new online learning platform. It can be seen therefore that the contexts are quite different but will be seen to generate the same issues and conceptual linkages. Such multiple contexts are seen by Byrne and Ragin (2009) to be typical of emerging ethnographic research:

*Ethnographers have sought to move beyond the concept of the fixed context, linked unproblematically to a case, and have sought to carry out ethnographies that are linked across sites, embedded in history, that incorporate their own personal histories and that link micro processes to macro structures and dynamics.* (p. 291)