Chapter 15
Blurring Boundaries with Computer-Mediated Communication: Academic–Personal Palimpsest as a Means of New Knowledge Production

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ABSTRACT

The authors survey the landscape of CMC and education by relating it to increasingly popular hybrid course structures. This chapter maps findings associated with academic learning and subjective knowledge in a graduate course assignment: the “electronic palimpsest”. This became a vehicle for the exploration of embodiment, identity, and virtual learning. Within the electronic palimpsest these themes were sustained, complicated, and evaluated from multiple standpoints, as demonstrated through content analysis of postings. Ultimately, this case study contributes to and supports the belief that case-specific accounts of alternative CMC projects are highly valuable in providing future directions for the requisite evolution of technologies associated with hybrid learning. The electronic palimpsest challenges typical assumptions of learning communities, as well as assessments and outcomes of learning in virtual environments. This study promotes possibilities for different pedagogical approaches to the question: what is the relationship between knowledge production and the development of learning communities?

INTRODUCTION

Academic learning environments have been historically comprised of physical classrooms as the primary social space for interaction and learning. With technology, namely the Internet, spaces of learning within traditional academic institutions have undergone significant transformation. While online learning and web-based classes gain momentum, an interesting and underexplored phenomenon remains: the “hybrid” learning environment. As
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educators continue to integrate online technologies, interpersonal relations in online learning and education have only just begun to receive the attention necessary for understanding how education plays a key role in individuals’ larger socio-communal learning (Freedman, Striedieck & Shurin, 2007). In an age of institutional change, the use of technology in classrooms remains not only fluid, but also contested. The continuing evolution of methods for the inclusion of various types of eLearning remains a subject for pedagogical inquiry. We contend that purposeful classroom communication and new types of learning are enabled by the creative use of hybrid learning environments between the traditional classroom and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs; see Ellsworth 2003).

The blurred boundary, or “in-between” space, produced by moving between online and offline environments serves as a conduit that allows academic expression and “out of school” identities to not only meet, but to negotiate their place in both a real and imagined social continuum. Where Boler (2002) is apprehensive about the ability of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) to foster the transformation of the individual’s growth both as a learner and within the educational context, we would offer a case study as a vehicle for such an assessment. Hayles (2002) posits that “living in a technologically engineered and information-rich environment brings with it associated shifts... changes in the experiences that constitute the dynamic lifeworld we inhabit” (p.299). This “lifeworld” is the essence of culminating, blurred spaces. It is within these spaces that our personal and academic identities collide to create non-bordered spaces where learning and meaning can be produced. The “formation of identity is a spatialized process” (Drzewiecka & Nakayama, 1998) with outcomes that result in both academic learning and new interpersonal interactions across languages and cultures.

In this chapter, we explore a computer-mediated academic project executed in a “hybrid” course at the graduate level (i.e. a course utilizing both offline and online learning environments). Through content analysis of the completed project “document”, we will show how learning that is culminated in this new and transformative way can be used for new knowledge production. For this particular case, we build from the assertion of Mitra and Watts (2002); the Internet can be “read” as a text disclosing information that expresses the identity of the authors – it is a cultural conveyance. We also extend and complicate this assertion with the concept of a palimpsest - the idea of constructing, then dismantling and rebuilding something that changes from inception to outcome. We are invested in understanding such a project with regard to how the personal and the academic co-conspire to produce multicultural and diverse knowledge. We are also interested in how this merging of knowledge, which may only be achievable through computer mediation, is made possible and becomes valuable through the electronic palimpsest exercise.

If, as suggested by Emig (2001), “learning can take place only through transactions with literal others in authentic communities of inquiry” (p.272), then it seems relevant to not only illustrate examples in which computer-mediated academic projects lead to new types of academic learning communities, but also go further in suggesting future directions for learning through computer-mediated environments. While debates continue about whether students can best achieve academic learning in the physical classroom setting or in online environments, much of the emphasis remains entrenched at this comparative level (see Emig, 2001; Wingard, 2004; Conrad, 2002). However, some scholars continue turning their attention toward ‘hybrid’ cases of learning that integrate technology to produce alternative educational outcomes (Ahmed & Stacey, 2001; Springgay, 2005; Keifer-Boyd, 2007). These hybrid cases raise multiple questions. For the purposes of this chapter, we will explore the following research questions: