Chapter 5

Face-to-Face Communication outside the Digital Realm to Foster Student Growth and Development

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ABSTRACT

Benefits of college go beyond acquisition of skills and knowledge to include understanding, effective decision-making, personal growth, and maturation. While online courses and online social interactions grow, the benefits of and preference for face-to-face interaction remain important. Digital learners are human beings, so non-digital ways of fostering their development remain relevant. Face-to-face interactions of significance occur in the classroom, and the real physical presence of each other cannot always be replaced by digital tools and delivery, nor should it be. While not downplaying online and digital technologies’ role in advancing academic progress online, in-person face-to-face learning experiences contribute in important ways to students’ growth and adaptation. Each time instructors and students communicate, they co-construct their evolving social reality. Face-to-face interactions provide unique capabilities and benefits in that transformational process, as this chapter explores.

INTRODUCTION

As digital capabilities rapidly develop and are applied to education, concerns are being raised and some soul-searching is going on about the quality and direction of American higher education in general (e.g., Arum & Roksa, 2011; Bok, 2006; Harris & Cullen, 2010; Hersh & Merrow, 2006; Menand, 2010; O’Brien, 2009; Zemsky, 2009).

In addition, scholars are asking what our increasing reliance on and heavy use of digital technology and online activity are doing to us socially and intellectually. Experts raise questions about the isolating effects of digital devices (e.g.
Turkle, 2011) and express concerns about diminished intellectual abilities and intelligence (e.g., Bauerlein, 2008). Others assert that digital technology is diminishing our ability to think deeply and is eroding academic standards (e.g., Jacoby, 2008). The balance between digital connection with others and contemplative time alone with one’s thoughts and feelings is deemed important but is getting more and more out of balance (e.g., Powers, 2010). There are concerns that digital technology is affecting our relationships and social life (Baym, 2010).

This is compounded by increasing concerns about online learning, which is growing. More than 20% (3.9 million) of all students in American colleges and universities (18 million) were taking at least one online course in the fall of 2007 (Allen & Seaman, 2008). That number jumped to 5.6 million by fall 2009 (Kaya, 2010). Online enrollment and the number of institutions offering online courses have steadily grown in number and this growth is seen across almost every discipline. Approximately one-third of baccalaureate institutions consider online delivery to be a critical component of their long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

Financial pressures make online delivery more and more attractive to institutions. For example, at the University of Florida, which was hard-hit by a 25% cutback in state funding over three years, 12 percent of credit hours were being earned online in the fall of 2010. The administration expects that to increase to 25 percent by 2015 (Gabriel, 2010).

Whether the concerns are about the quality of higher education, the diminishment in social relationships or intellectual ability, or the reasons driving increased enrollment and availability of online courses, it is worthwhile to consider whether something is lost when there is limited or no face-to-face interaction of instructor with students and of students with each other. Likewise, it may be useful to ponder the possibility that there are some compelling reasons to retain and promote in-person, face-to-face experience in the learning process in the midst of increasing online delivery of courses. To the extent that face-to-face communication contributes to the effectiveness of education, it is a significant variable not to be lost in the expanding flurry of new applications and digital devices (e.g., the iPad) that are electronic and digital technologies and mobile learning experiences available to more and more of the net generation. So, while technology will continue to impact teaching methods, we also need to keep in mind the important benefits of and the preference for face-to-face interaction in the developmental process for college students.

One of the most impactful decisions students make about college is the major they will select and study in depth. Another impactful but not mindful decision they will make on a daily basis, concerns their use of technology in lieu of face-to-face communication, not just in their learning but in their social interactions. Most students are heavy users of online technology and social media. But for us, the overarching question is what leads to a more memorable and meaningful college experience. Although students rarely consider these issues, I contend that there may be obvious and subtle but significant benefits in the long run by choosing to include face-to-face experience with instructors and fellow students. It is worthwhile to ponder what is gained by obtaining at least some face-to-face experience in this life-changing process of earning a college degree. The remainder of this chapter will examine some of these considerations.

But first, a word about what this chapter is not, and a few details about my background related to this topic. This chapter does not intend to “take sides.” It is not meant to argue whether online or in-person learning is better. Both have their strengths and weaknesses. Rather, it explores the benefits of actions and conditions that occur either best or only in face-to-face communication, when people are physically present to one another, and reasons why that adds value to the developmental journey for college students as well...
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