(Re)Framing and (Re)Designing Instruction: Transformed Teaching in Traditional and Online Classrooms

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Abstract:

Transformational teaching requires faculty members to shift their mindsets and classroom practices. For those committed to constructing innovative learning environments that transform the lives of students and teachers alike, student and faculty partnerships are critical in all aspects of the course, from initial design to final assessments. This article provides reflections and insights from two university professors as they reframed their thinking, curriculum design, and classroom practices to enhance the construction of knowledge communities. Through the use of collaborative autoethnography and critical transformative dialogue, the authors explore what it means to engage in transformational change from a traditional model of “sage-on-stage” to one of active student participation in curriculum design and development. The role of student participation in curricular co-creation is discussed as the authors describe the transformation they experienced in their roles as professors and scholars in traditional and online classrooms.

Key Words:

Transformed teaching practices; student empowerment; critical transformative dialogue; online course design.
Introduction

Changing one’s mind about curriculum design and teaching practices can be a difficult thing especially when you have worked in higher education for more than twenty years. The increased use of sophisticated and robust learning technologies in post-secondary classrooms requires faculty members to shift their mindsets and actions from those of "sage-on-stage" to collaborative partnerships to meet the needs of students in complex and fast-paced learning environments. Parsons and Stephenson (2005) argue for the importance of developing critical reflective practices to allow educators to gain an awareness of their teaching practices as well as the rationale and reasons that underlie their epistemology of teaching. It is through such reflective practices and collaborative partnerships that transformative dialogues can take place. We are two educators in a Learning Design and Technology program who are engaged in ongoing reflective praxis. We utilize transformative dialogues with each other to gain additional insight into our individual ways of being (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) and learn from one another as we strive to construct innovative learning environments for an increasingly diverse student population in our graduate education courses.

Lee (2003) suggested that “the challenge is for designers of learning environments to consider how cultural practices, especially among student populations of color and those living in poverty, may offer opportunities to improve the design of learning technologies” (p. 42). As faculty who work in the area of Learning Design and Technology, it is necessary to continuously reflect on the core values that inform our classroom practices as we design and deliver curriculum. This becomes even more important as there continues to be an increase in diverse student populations at our institution, which is located in the Southwestern United States and shares a border with Mexico. At the heart of our teaching is a commitment to meeting the needs of our students, who represent a diverse cross-section of international learners as well as students from the U.S.

This essay provides insight into one such occasion when we, as learning design and technology faculty members, came together to collaboratively reflect on and discuss how we made conscious decisions to change our way of being as classroom teachers. Through the use of guiding questions, reflective dialogue, and collaborative autoethnographic methods, we recall, recount, and point to moments in our teaching history that represent a transformative shift in our way of being as teachers. As we looked more-in-depth at the causes of these changes, we could see that they arose from our commitment to meet the needs of our students by shifting from faculty-centered to student-centered classrooms.

Methods: Guiding Questions, Reflective Dialogue, and Collaborative Autoethnography

We began by asking ourselves three critically reflective questions to identify ways we have transformed our classrooms from faculty-focused to student-centered.

1. How did we begin redesigning our classrooms from one that is faculty-focused, which is typical in most U.S. higher education classrooms, to one that allows for students to be co-constructors of the classroom experience?
2. How did our teaching change as a result of thinking about teaching and learning from an active student participation paradigm?

3. If we could share one example of where we can see a manifestation of our transformed teaching, what would the example be?

As we asked each other these questions, our inquiry began through a process of individual self-reflection, partnered reflective dialogue, and collaborative autoethnography. Autoethnography is defined as "a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic fieldwork and writing" (Maréchal, 2010, p. 43). While autoethnography, a method of qualitative inquiry, allows for the "narratives of the self" (Pichon, 2013, p. 4) to emerge during an analysis, collaborative autoethnography afforded each of us with the opportunity to be "simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical, and ethnographic" (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2016, p.17) as we sought to understand our theoretical grounding, classroom practices, and collective experiences as educators. Our collaborative autoethnographic practices included using qualitative research methods like utilizing in-depth interviewing with one another, collecting and reviewing course syllabi, and evaluating student feedback we received in our courses. Additionally, many of our courses are archived in our institutional learning management system, and we were able to use course archives as needed. We used Google Drive and Google Docs as tools for data collection, analysis and to write up our results. This essay is the culmination of this collaborative process. In the sections that follow, we share the results of our collaborative work in hopes that it can inform and influence others to engage in these same types of critical dialogues.

Reflections Lead to Change

As we began to look collectively at the experiences that transformed our thinking about teaching and learning, three (3) themes emerged. Pulling our writing inspiration from the works of Pérez and Pasque (2013), Pichon (2013), and El Khoury and Usman (2018), we share now our narrative accounts as educators committed to constructing innovative knowledge communities in graduate education courses. Although we write collectively throughout the introduction, methods, and conclusion of this article, we present our individual responses to the questions in this section. We feel that this allows for our individual voices to be heard even amid our collaboration.

Theme 1: A shift in core values, beliefs, and actions

Reflective Question 1:

*How did you begin redesigning your classroom from one that is faculty-focused, which is typical in most higher education classrooms, to one that allows for students to be co-constructors of the classroom experience?*

*Julia speaks about shared power in the classroom*

For me, the shift to increase active student participation (Abdelmalak, 2013) in higher education classrooms stems from a long-held commitment to support and promote student voices by sharing power in the classroom and through the use of technology. As I began looking for the origins of my shift to a student-centered classroom model, my reflections took me back to my time as a middle school teacher...
from 1996-2000. With four computers in my classroom, I needed strategies to engage students with these technology tools. Fortunately, I had a mentor, and I began participating in a statewide grant project that helped teachers integrate technology in classrooms. These relationships provided scaffolds for my creativity and assisted me in developing solutions like the use of collaborative group work and a project-centered model. In my classroom, all students learned to use computers through group rotation. For example, I would put my 8th-grade students in groups, give each group a unit topic and a set of parameters. In groups, they used textbooks, the library, and the computers with internet access to create the activities and assessments for one of our social studies units. Then they taught the activities and graded the assessments. It was one of the most challenging yet rewarding teaching and learning experiences of my life.

As I started teaching doctoral students, I saw a weakness and fears in myself about what it means to be a teacher and an educational researcher, who is successful with scholarly publication. In my doctoral courses, I started integrating a process that supported students in deconstructing a research article and practicing collaborative construction of articles of their own, based on the class topic. I remain committed to helping my students reach the publication stage even in the currently prolonged publishing environment. I came across Pichon’s article (2013) about autoethnography as an instructional tool with students. Autoethnography seemed promising, but then I saw a colleague’s class publish a book on Amazon and, I thought, “Well why not? It does not have to be perfect, but let’s use what these students are creating and move more swiftly to publish on the current and emerging topics and knowledge artifacts from our classes.”

Even if the product that emerges from students' efforts lacks wider cultural value as an innovation, it is most important for students to engage in knowledge-creating inquiry and to develop a corresponding identity—that is, to consider themselves to be not only consumers but also creators of knowledge. They may create knowledge for their local community, and they certainly can create knowledge in relation to their own initial position as learners. These kinds of considerations make evident the value of restructuring educational practices in accordance with knowledge creation models” (Paavola et al., 2004, p. 572)

As I reflect on my teaching today, my beliefs about active student participation in classroom practice still ring true. It is so important for the student voice to be present in the technology classes I teach. Student voices are amazing! Give them challenges, choices, and opportunities to collaborate and what they create blows me away every time.

**Xeturah speaks of shifting foundations**

The shift for me began after receiving a peer-observation of one of my courses in 1995. I was teaching undergraduate African American Studies and Women’s Studies courses at an urban institution in the Midwest. I remember being so excited about finally becoming a faculty member and I could not wait to teach my first lecture. Like so many other new faculty members, I decided to model my courses, and my style of teaching, after one of my mentors. He had a very formal demeanor and followed a Germanic style of teaching, which placed the faculty member in the middle of the room while the
students sat quietly taking notes. In that style, I was the impaerter of knowledge, and the students were there to learn from me. I was convinced that this style of teaching was assisting me in becoming an excellent teacher, especially when the students seemed to be taking tons of notes. It never occurred to me that maybe the faculty-focused nature of the courses was leading to the high attrition and low student pass rates. I continued teaching that way until one of my colleagues did a classroom observation of my teaching and gave me a copy of Teaching to Transgress (1994) by bell hooks.

From that book, I learned that a classroom should be a place that invited student engagement, critical inquiry, and excitement. I saw that classroom practices should be rooted in one’s theoretical groundings and I realized that my classroom practices did not embody my commitment to student empowerment, critical discourse, and social justice. Most importantly, I found that the classroom should be a space for communal learning and shared power between students and teachers. With eyes newly opened, I decided to begin a journey away from the Germanic lecture-style to one that demonstrated my newfound commitment to engaged student learning. I found that new foundation in Black womanist theory (Thompson, 1998; Paris, 1993), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000), and critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

**Theme 2: Changes in teaching and classroom practices**

Reflective Question 2: How did your teaching change as a result of thinking about teaching and learning from an active student participation paradigm?

Xeturah speaks of student-driven classrooms

Over the years, my teaching practices shifted from lectures to student-driven classrooms as my teaching philosophy became grounded in Black womanism, critical race theory, and culturally responsiveness. When I teach face-to-face (f2f) in traditional classroom settings, my preference is to have classrooms with flexible seating. Teaching in classrooms with flexible seating allows for room reconfiguration. This allows us to create opportunities for group work and paired-sharing among students. As Oliver and Kostouros (2014) posit, reconfiguring the room from “desks in rows” to learning spaces that are “open for exchanges between everyone” reduces power imbalances in the room while encouraging curricular practices that are “lived and shared” (pp. 10 - 11).

I also integrate technology whenever possible, especially in my research courses. For example, I used iClickers® in the qualitative research courses to provide students with the opportunity to drive the direction of course activities. To accomplish this, I create PowerPoint presentations with a list of the possible directions we can go with the night’s discussions or activities. Students use their iClickers to vote on how the night should go. If the counts are close, we will discuss the options, allowing students to share why they chose a particular direction, and then we vote again. The discussion usually leads to a consensus about where next to go. Finally, I have begun using video conferencing tools that are part of our learning management system to permit students to “HyFlex”, (a hybrid, flexible format) (Abdelmalak & Parra, 2016) into the class rather than attending in the classroom. HyFlexing provides students, who may need to sacrifice f2f attendance on occasion to meet family and work priorities, a way to continue to build community with colleagues even though they cannot be physically in
the classroom. HyFlexing also supports the student's sense of control over their learning "by combining multiple delivery modes and giving students the opportunity to choose their mode of participation" (Abdelmalak & Parra, 2016, p. 30).

I have worked with doctoral students as co-teachers in my online, Masters-level courses. Our partnership provides them with an opportunity to serve as a co-designer in all aspects of the course including the development of the syllabus, discussion boards, assignments, course pages, and assessment tools, like assignment rubrics. This team-teaching approach gives the doctoral students much-needed practice in developing, designing and teaching courses and it provides me with the opportunity to learn from each student ways I can improve my teaching. Finally, a midterm feedback option gives students a chance to give feedback to me and my co-teacher about what is working, or not, in the course design. We then use the feedback to make changes in aspects of the course. I have learned over the years that changes based on student feedback can make a difference in student retention as well as student engagement levels; when they see that the feedback matters, they are more likely to stay and actively participate.

**Julia speaks of groundings and frameworks:**

For me, my foundations in *an active student participation paradigm* started with pedagogy and strategies and over the past few years, in higher education, I have begun to align with my theoretical groundings as an educational researcher. My theoretical foundation is currently grounded in culturally responsive teaching and the use of pedagogy to love, transform and empower learners (Freire, 1998; hooks, 2003; Noddings, 1988). I always say that the students have the best ideas for what we can do to modify our learning design, to reflect what is truly needed, and to support each other in the classroom. By meeting students where they are and applying knowledge creation opportunities to their contexts, my classrooms became more inclusive, and the student participation levels increased dramatically. This allowed for innovation, collaboration, and co-creation while providing the opportunity for culturally-responsive teaching (Woodley, Hernandez, Parra, & Negash, 2017; Woodley, 2018) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Woodley, Mucundanyi, & Lockard, 2017).

Fast forward, and another key concept entered my pedagogical framework – learning and knowledge community. I have been teaching a fully online class, EDLT 560 Fostering Online Learning Communities, for ten years and it is this class that started my journey toward building online learning communities. Over time, I saw the power of knowledge sharing, collaboration, and creation. I realized a new preference for the term “innovative knowledge communities” focused on the “knowledge creation metaphor” (Paavola, Lipponen, & Hakkarainen, 2004; Paavola & Hakkarainen, 2005).

“Knowledge-creation models conceptualize learning and knowledge advancement as collaborative processes for developing shared objects of activity. Learning is not conceptualized through processes occurring in individuals' minds, or through processes of participation in social practices. Learning is understood as a collaborative effort directed toward developing some mediated artifacts, broadly defined as including knowledge, ideas, practices, and material or conceptual artifacts. The interaction among different forms of knowledge or between knowledge and other activities is emphasized as a
requirement for this kind of innovativeness in learning and knowledge creation” (Paavola et al., 2004, pp. 569-570).

As I moved to more f2f teaching, I continued utilizing online learning management systems and collaborative online tools in various blended learning models. Online and blended learning environments with flexible discussion forums afford educators, learning designers, and researchers the opportunity to see the dynamics of a well-designed and expertly facilitated innovative knowledge community designed from a knowledge creation approach. In these flexible discussion forums, students can create reflections, engage in student-led conversations, including debates, and share just about anything. They can share links to individual and collaborative creations from Google Docs, to blog posts, to creations made with YouTube, SoundCloud, Powtoon, and other creative technology tools. They can even create their surveys and do their research and report to the class their findings.

Theme 3: Examples of the Manifestation of Transformation

Reflective Questions 3:

If you could share one example of where you can see a manifestation of your transformed teaching, what would it be?

Julia speaks about active student participation:

Since 2012, I have been experimenting with a framework of active student participation (Abdelmalak, 2013), where students and I co-design the upcoming course by co-creating course learning outcomes, activities, and assessments. Abdelmalak identifies five strategies for this participatory course design process- “1) articulating the rationale of student involvement in curriculum design, 2) pre-determining a set of procedures, 3) brainstorming in small groups, 4) negotiating as a whole class, and 5) facilitating and guiding throughout the entire process” (Abdelmalak, 2013, Abstract).

This type of participatory course design (Parra & Bontly, 2016) was incredibly challenging to me at first, but over time, I have gained confidence and experienced increasing success due to some strategic course design. A substantial improvement was preparing students for the first live class meeting (I have done this with f2f and online courses). For example, in one course, the syllabus content noted they would be co-designing the course, and a Getting Started module was introduced that included online discussion forum activities. The online discussion provided my input about course content, and they were assigned as follows:

In order to contribute to this activity, you need to identify your own “personal goals” for this course, along with the questions and topics which are important to you. Consider doing some research on the big ideas for this course and combining those with what you need to accomplish this semester.

After two live classes where students worked as a class and in groups to co-create learning objectives and assessments, we had a curriculum that everyone agreed upon. We had modularly developed content with class co-constructed assessments that included creating podcasts and a class book. The activities, assignments, and assessments contained in these modules were often interrelated and to be honest, the actual instructional design was pretty messy. However, since we met weekly, we were
able to discuss, negotiate, and continuously clarify the chaos. The podcasts can be accessed from our Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/NMSULDT (do a search in the search box for “podcasts”).

With the class book concept, we continue to scaffold into this. One class created a Google Docs book on the overarching topic of Learning Design: Topics, Tools, and Challenges and another class was successful in an Amazon book publication titled, We Are Superheroes! Taking Flight with Critical Digital Literacy: Graduate Students of Learning Design & Technology Explore Concepts of Critical Digital Literacy.

Xeturah shares about dissertation structures:
During the Fall 2016 term, I had the opportunity to teach our department’s dissertation seminar course while a colleague was on sabbatical. It was my first time working directly with many doctoral students on their dissertation proposals. I was so excited to teach the course because just a few years earlier I had been registered in the class. Through the years, I have learned “not to look to someone else’s lesson plan, but to look to my students” (Nguyen & Phuong, 2017, p.4) for partnership in reaching for course learning goals. As we began to design the course, I spoke with doctoral students who were in their last semester before defending, to identify the most valuable parts of the course that assisted them in getting their dissertations done. There was a collective tendency to name organization and structure as the primary topics that made the most difference for them. So, I began the initial design of the course with the student feedback in mind and looked for ways to incorporate additional strategies for organization and design in the dissertation seminar course.

The course was f2f, and there were a total of eleven doctoral students that started with me. There was a diversity of research topics the students were focusing on, but my primary goal was to provide them with ideas and suggestions for organizing themselves to meet the goal to have well-organized and fully developed drafts of the first three chapters of their dissertations. The goal was to schedule time weekly for uninterrupted writing sessions. These writing sessions range in time from 15 minutes to up to four hours, depending on the student's needs. While the more extended sessions included a break to manage one's well-being, the objective of the structured writing sessions is to have scheduled a time to write without interruption. The idea is to write without worrying about editing, spelling, or even proofreading. I teach students that every time you write, you should do so knowing that you will need to edit. No matter what, you will edit so don't worry about it. Focus on the writing because there will always be time for editing later. I began each class session with uninterrupted writings sessions of 2 minutes, 5 minutes, 10 minutes and built up to 1-hour sessions weaved into the class time. Within a few weeks, the students requested that it become part of the course for the remainder of the term.

By the end of the term, every student had a well-written draft of the first three chapters of their dissertations. This is evidence, for me, that there is indeed a transformation in my teaching from when I began all those years ago. My attention is less on whether I measure up to some Neoliberal form of education and more on whether the courses created space for communal learning and shared power between
students and teachers. Ultimately, the later will make the most significant difference in producing engaged students and empowered educational leaders.

**Conclusion**

As classroom teachers, we are asked to look to new technologies to engage our students but rarely are we encouraged to stop and reflect on how our theoretical groundings give rise to our curriculum design and teaching practices. Through the use of reflective practices and collaborative partnerships with like-minded teachers, it is possible to engage in transformative dialogues that lead to the development of student-centered classrooms. We have found that such collaborative practices make a difference for us as well as for our students. In our small institution in the U.S. and Mexican borderlands, we have taken the time to reflect on our foundational beliefs about student-centered classrooms. Through the use of individual self-reflection, reflective dialogue, and collaborative autoethnography, we were able to identify ways we have shifted our beliefs and practices to shift our classrooms from being faculty-centered to becoming increasingly student-centered. By sharing our experiences in this forum, we hope to encourage other educators to work collaboratively as they continue on their own journeys to meet the needs of their students.

**Authors Bios**

Dr. Xeturah Woodley is an assistant professor in the College of Education at New Mexico State University, where she teaches instructional design and technology. Her research, teaching, and service weave together Black womanist thought, critical race theory and social justice praxis as she interrogates the inherent biases that plague American higher education. Dr. Woodley’s research interests include Black womanist thought, social justice issues in higher education, and critical pedagogies in online education. To contact Dr. X. Woodley, please email her at xwoodley@nmsu.edu.

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**Statement from Authors**

As social justice educators, we are concerned with the continued reinforcement of elitist notions of privilege in higher education including in the value placed on authorship order as it regards journal articles. Thus, we want to acknowledge that the authorship of this manuscript is credited equally to both authors. Each contributed toward its visioning, construction, writing, and editing. Regardless of where names fall on the authorship list, we are both “first” author.
References


