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A Neophyte About Online Teaching

Almost Done

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The following autoethnography reflects a neophyte instructor's obsession with teaching an online graduate course. The experience forces her to move ethnographically forward and backward with students in a novel, and sometimes, more intimate fashion. She struggles to balance a serving of technology with a dollop of human interaction, but finds online teaching can be time consuming. Though students are physically dispersed and isolated, they sustain and bond in new and different ways in an online community. Her narrative reveals how technologies are created, apprehended, and used in everyday life. Online learning has become ubiquitous at all levels of education. Teachers and students need to question whether technology in their lives represents a force for good or evil. In the end, autoethnography becomes transformative as the author gains a heightened awareness of the social, cultural, and personal influences shaping her online teaching experience.

Keywords: *autoethnography; online teaching & learning; narrative*

Time flows by in chunks. Five o'clock in the morning, I awake. Forces take hold. I sit up. Think of logging in. Take a minute to check my students. Week three of my online graduate course. My dining-room classroom. I access my students from my laptop.

I used to think of online as foreign territory. Now, surrounded by everyday media, I recognize the need for how technology is created, apprehended and used (Carey, 1989). Too long a Luddite. Avoiding dark hallways where chains of computers lit up rooms. I recall being fascinated by a multimedia lab secured by a wired fence in the university art room. But when I was a graduate student, I had to master technology: e-mail, forums, spreadsheets, the Internet, cellular phones, digital cameras, word processing, software programs, discussion groups, celebrated chat systems. In fact, I wrote at the computer to the point of obsession (Lee, 2005).

For a few minutes, I make excuses to go back to sleep. Try to divert attention to more shut-eye. But there is a tight feeling in my back. I roll out of bed, stand, face the truth. Every day for the past 3 weeks, an early morning rise. No coincidence there. The discipline of the online instructor. I admit I draw lines around this course, which is not the same as running circles. I calculate angles, delineate slopes, stimulate myself scientifically by logging in anywhere and anytime. The ease, ubiquity, democracy of the online classroom. Submerged in words, I guide a learning colony in cyberspace. Progressive online socialization. Education with constructivist pedagogy.

The cold glow of the screen, I nourish by words. Instruction and discussion by text. Fascinating student profiles. They meet and greet online. Post and host discussions. Postings occur in a frenzy in the initial stage of building an online community. Students connect in the absence of face-to-face presence. An attenuation of physical stereotyping leads to judgments based on words, verve, and attitude. Marginalized minorities flourish. There is synchronous and asynchronous learning. The flexibility of access. The collapse of space, time, formality between instructor and students. There are other definitions than online learning: e-learning, Internet learning, distributed learning, networked learning, tele-learning, virtual learning, computer-assisted learning, Web-based learning, and distance learning.

I get out of bed, tiptoe to the door, close it behind me. Soak in my surroundings. Weak sunlight, the dawn of May streams into the room. I turn on my laptop. On days like today, a dreamy silence pervades. I look around the table. Piles of paper, files everywhere. The world sleeps and the room is calm and silent. I type in my password, run fingers through my hair. The screen exhibits serene blankness. Seductive stillness. I will not battle my inertia but surf for 10 minutes.

Bits of icons pass me by. The hourglass announces the Web site loads. I face the screen, welcome the online world. A mischievous little girl, I hover over the homepage. The postmodern thrill of not only knowing I have entered the computer evolution, but as a sensitive online drill sergeant. The education of the tyro online instructor. Yesterday, 5 hours online. Do too many of us on this planet already sit by a computer, connected to the Internet? Our life-support system.

A sparkling haze hangs over trees outside. Day after day, the budgie cage sits empty by my side. I recall Joey, our budgie. A flying machine. Meaningless flights that displayed his power and showmanship. Coping with walls, he would fly higher and higher every day. Sometimes, he flew in circles, attracted standing ovations. There is a photo of his homecoming with my daughter. A gorgeous blue bird. She is happy. Joey is plotting. One

day, the screen door opened and out he flew. The big escape. His flight to freedom. Thereafter, he was nowhere to be found. Community bulletin: Escapee wears blue feathers. Disappeared while molting.

In my jeans and t-shirt, I hurry to the window. Sighing, I smell the air. Clean with a hint of warmth, the blue sky. I breathe, knowing that unless some sour fate has befallen Joey, he breathes the same fresh air. Neighbors' wide-open windows attract disparate dreams and nightmares. Instantly, calls for Joey echo in the street. Captivity or freedom, what did he want? Silent, I soak in the history. Eyeing the trees, I am resurrected. The glorious pleasure of his brave red shield searching nature.

My eyes close and open. I am back at my laptop. The course Web page awaits. I type in my password. Buttons and icons await my navigation pleasure.

- Course menu
- Homepage
- Welcome
- Assignments
- Calendar
- Chat
- Compile
- Course content
- Course index
- Course syllabus
- Discussions
- Getting started
- How-to-do stuff
- Internal e-mail
- Learner's resources
- Library info
- Personal profiles
- Resources
- Questionnaires

Slices of discourse pass me by. I click *Discussions*, then *Small Group 01*. Five new postings about the first assignment. My skin thickens. Typing, there is the dry rustle of skin on my fingers. With a sturdy pose, I compose words. Thank goodness my mother was a typing teacher. Eighty words per minute, my greatest online asset. Two-fingered typists need not apply. Students post comments about two Palloff and Pratt (1999a, 1999b) articles, "When Teaching and Learning Leave the Classroom" and "Defining and

Redefining Community.” In pairs, students comment on building cyber-communities as part of online learning. Inquiry, collaboration, critical analysis. A student from Hong Kong posts at 4 a.m., murmuring words of wisdom. Direct and confrontational. With frozen eyes, I scan recent comments. A student repeats himself over and over and adds exclamations marks!!! The group is engaged.

“Morning Mom.” I continue to read as she greets me. I check the time. It is 7:30 a.m. “You chatting with your students?” She is curious but encouraging. I am buried in the quicksand of technology. Can’t stop now. In response to queries, I access up-to-date information. Use the medium to deliver quality learning. I click *Small Group 2*. Only three postings. A student will be away for a few days. He’ll work at the summer Olympics with no Internet access. Apologies everywhere. Another student will complete the article summary. Not much discussion about Palloff and Pratt. Meaningless posts with no connection to assignments. I move on. Click *Small Group 3*. There are six postings. Students have written summaries and will post to the large group discussion. But one student hesitates, wishes to revise. Overall, online learning appears to bring substantial benefits. An intense regime of 24/7 access, convenience, online journals, a global community, individualized instruction, classes across time zones, indisputable records of participation,

“Not chatting yet. Just reading postings,” I respond. Her shadow vague as she walks by with cereal. In the distance, I hear the television show Jacob Two-Two. He repeats himself to be heard. Though small for his age, Jacob has a big heart and determination. From a book by Mordecai Richler, the animated cartoon features globetrotting, mysterious neighbors, revolting cafeteria food, treacherous teachers, international spies.

Bits of email pass me by. The monitor shines. I check my internal course e-mail. There are 25 new messages with diverse subject headings:

- Profile
- Name change
- Blueberry pie recipe
- Away next week
- Due dates
- Required reading
- How to find partners
- Small groups
- E-portfolios
- Help with case study
- Smiling faces
- My absence

Project proposal
 A request
 Another question
 It's happening again
 Weekly reading
 Topic switcheroo
 I'm back
 Confusion
 Need advice
 Oops again
 Sorry
 Almost done!
 Clear as mud

Clear as mud. Every day, every hour, the deluge of e-mail. A feeling of safety, a special place protected by silence. Alone time. Their presence repeats like rituals. Numerous pen pals from around the world. Perhaps the word *online* evokes the sense there is more time in the world. Solitude covers me like a fog. So much to read, so much to answer, resolve, evaluate. For three solid weeks, nothing but flip/flop between online teaching and daily life. There are cultural voices from around the world: Canada, Taiwan, Germany, Australia, Hong Kong, United States. A rare downside: Online students expect immediate gratification. An innate sense of urgency. Yesterday, one student e-mailed three times. I know he will email today. Realistic expectations must be set at the outset.

“What time are we going out?” Shards of choices pass me by. Online learning is like an all-you-can-eat Indian buffet. US\$6.99 for lunch. You stuff yourself in barbaric ways. Gourmands of the Web, a mouse click away. So much variety. Driven in greed and hunger to try everything. A madness with no explanation, lured by a seductive menu: rice, samosas and/or pakoras, three or more kinds of vegetable curry, two or more meat varieties, usually butter chicken, chutney, sweets, and more. With each fill-up, flavors of cloves, cumin, cardamom. A rapid succession of firm–floppy, blistered *naan* bread from the kitchen. Famous chicken with masala sauce hijacked by green pepper. And my favorite dessert, *Chai* tea with cardamom. Logic has no seat when gorging at the buffet table.

“Just a few more e-mails,” I say, apologetically. Slivers of lives pass me by. In the distance, from the countryside, a baby boy was born yesterday! I open the photo, take a look at the newborn. Not a simple childbirth. The water broke, and the doctor ruptured the membrane of the amniotic sac with medication. He used pitocin to induce labor despite the ongoing debate

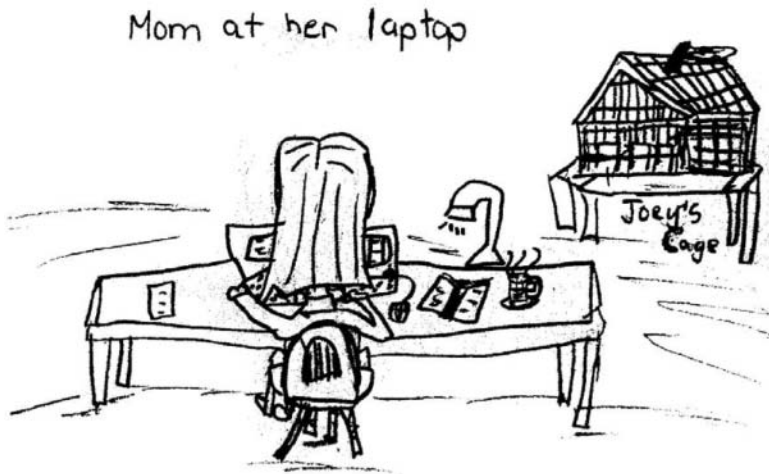
about the medication. Nevertheless, a beautiful baby. Classmates send congratulatory e-mails. Instantly, a happy family. For the last few weeks, e-mails galore about the pregnant pause. But they will live happily ever after. No doubt, with a houseful of children.

There are other shared experiences, namely, a job loss, aging parents to care for, a serious court case that causes an online absence, a pregnancy, nursing-home issues, traveling, camping trips, conferences, a car accident, sick children, marital separation, loneliness, and isolation. A lady with type II diabetes tries to mend relations after broken promises. She begs forgiveness. But she weakens, overeats, regains weight. Cannot get back on track. Daily e-mails to me. Venting becomes an awkward but intimate ritual. "What time we going out?" The sun absorbs May and she repeats the question.

Bits of people pass me by. I glance out the window and see a neighbor drive away. A sprinkler sprays and an airplane roars above. It is a whole new morning. A green pickup truck screeches. He backs up and goes forward. His inside light goes on as he pulls out a map. Then he speeds away. Has he found his way? Everything is bright now—road, sky, trees, streetlamps. All I understand are the circles and spirals around this course. Abstract silence of tranquility, meditation. Wistful anecdotes of intersecting lives. I wander from den to den, read the evening news, shelves stacked with novels and stories. I turn the last page, stare into the screen and nourish by silence. Snippets of teaching and learning. Brief moments to focus. Read, reread, scroll. Satisfied but numb, I shake my head. Look toward the sky.

"Just a few more e-mails," I promise. "Okay, but you always say that," she laughs. Suddenly, she puts her arms around me. A fire ignites inside. The dark shadow in her eyes reminds me of our main mission for the day: bring home our new budgie. The moment we saw him in the pet store, she wanted him. Turning, I embrace her. Kiss her forehead. Big tears leave spots on my cheeks. Inside, I thank her. She keeps me human. I am reminded of McLuhan's wisdom to balance high tech with high touch. The morning has finally started. Daylight brightens the room. One perfect smile from her and I am set for the day (Lee, 2006). We will sing and stroll. Have our favorite lunch of corn soup and potstickers. Enjoy a cozy moment in the restaurant. We'll sit across the table. Have a tête-à-tête. A mother-daughter gabfest. She'll tell funny stories; I'll tell funny stories. Girl talk. These hours together stored for later replay. I check the time. It is 9.00 a.m. I click *logout*. With a twinkle in her eye, she says, "Can we bring our new budgie home now?"

Sketching by Amber, 10-Years-Old



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