Fostering Student Engagement: Creating a Culture of Learning Online

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Cover Page Footnote

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I have been teaching at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) in New York City for 15 years; since 2004, I have taught at least one class online each semester. Before I began teaching online, my greatest reservation was whether I could recreate the kind of culture that so often develops in my onsite classes. By culture, I mean a familiar group with its own norms and patterns of behaviors. Influenced by constructivist theorists like Dewey (1916) and Bruner (1996), and by an understanding of the social and relational aspect of learning, I have always depended upon the familiarity of names, voices, and the physical space of the classroom—what Jaffee (2003) calls the "pedagogical ecology" (p. 228) to enhance the learning process.

In addition to fostering the general culture that evolves in the classroom, familiarity promotes a culture of learning, which I define as the social experience of being a student: a shared understanding of expectations, diverse backgrounds, and goals; a respect for one another and the learning process; and an intellectual curiosity to move beyond where one was when one entered the classroom. A culture of learning both requires and reproduces the active engagement and thoughtful participation of students as well as their ability to take ownership of their own learning and to think critically about it (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). In describing the importance of mutual learning cultures, Bruner (1996) states, "[t]here is a mutual sharing of knowledge and ideas, mutual aid in mastering material, division of labor, and exchange of roles, opportunity to reflect on the group's activities" (p. xv). These discussions centered on the brick-and-mortar classroom. I wondered whether such a learning culture would be possible in a community college course online, and, if so, how.

To answer these questions, I analyzed student work from my online Introduction to Sociology classes over two semesters. I focus primarily on the discussion board—a format that allows an asynchronous online course to mirror the type of discussions that occur in a brick-and-mortar classroom. Although there are other tools that may provide useful sites of research, such as wikis and blogs, this analysis centers on the discussion board because it is a prominent feature in my online courses. Using grounded theory (Glaser & Straus, 1967), as patterns emerged from student posts to the discussion board, I have developed four interrelated categories illuminating essential aspects of a culture of learning. Much in the way that sociologists define culture as a way of life— a set of norms and values of a particular group—these four categories represent a set of norms and values that are essential to fostering student engagement in online settings. In fact, the structure of the online asynchronous classroom arguably facilitates the emergence of this culture, especially as it limits the teacher's role to that of "guider and enabler" (Bruner, 1996, p. xii) of discovered knowledge.

Students At BMCC: Some Context

In 2009–2010, when this study was conducted, there were 21,424 students enrolled at BMCC. According to the BMCC Factbook (2009-2010, p.24), 59.6% of the students were women and 40.4% were men, with a median age of 22 years. Approximately 70% of the students identified as Hispanic (37.7%) or Black (33.5%); most of the remainder identified as Asian (14.6%) or White (15.0%). Close to 15,000 students qualified for federal Pell grants.

Thus, the majority of those enrolled were students of color from low-income households. Many were the first in their families to attend college. Most were employed either full or part time, took on courseloads of 12 credits or more, and had the responsibility of caring for family members—children, grandparents, nieces, nephews, or younger siblings.

This context is important for a few reasons. A recent report shows that half of all community college students have taken online courses (Public Agenda, 2013). However, although a few studies, including Brown (2011) and Xu and Jaggars (2014), have been conducted on the online experiences of community college students, that research tends to be quantitative and focus primarily on course outcomes like GPA and attrition. Other studies (Bambara, Harbour, Davies, & Athey, 2009; Jaggars, 2014) have tried to look at student engagement and general attitudes toward online classes, but that research tends not to focus on the type of learning that takes place. Given the lived realities and multiple identities of most community college students, their experiences with online learning must be at the forefront of the research. Thus, I hope this study can enhance what we already know about those experiences.

Structure of the Distance Learning Course

I use the learning management system Blackboard© for my Introduction to Sociology course. Weekly assignments are announced on the opening page of the class site. In addition to readings and interactive lecture notes, a central feature of the assignments is the discussion board. For each unit, I post questions similar to those I ask in an onsite class. Students must then post a substantive response to my question as well as to another person's post. To help students understand the expectations, I provide examples of what I mean by substantive. During the first few weeks of the course, as students are getting used to the format, I also continue to highlight examples of substantive posts and responses. I send private emails to students who are not engaging substantively with the material and refer them to certain posts as examples of what they should be doing. This does seem to help those students who may be new to online courses; once I send these emails, I generally see improvement in the substance and detail of the students' posts. In fact, the primary reason students do not perform well on the discussion board component of the course is failing to submit work, rather than submitting posts that are not substantive.

All of the students are expected to read all the posts and all the responses to the discussion board, and I set deadlines for each post required throughout the week. For example, by the first half of each week, students must submit a post that addresses that week's question and then respond to one

other person's post by the end of the week. To ensure that students are able to read all the posts and responses coming in each week and still have time for the weekly course readings, I require only one response. Given the class size of 25, students have to read at least 50 entries each week. With all their responsibilities, the time these students have to devote to each course is constrained. Thus, I strive to organize the course in a way that maximizes participation and learning without overwhelming the students. In fact, once the week is over, the discussion boards are closed so that the students can concentrate on the new material.

After the midweek posting deadline, I summarize what the students have generated, often using direct quotes from their posts to reinforce or examine key ideas. When appropriate, I also respond to individual student posts, providing positive reinforcement, follow-up questions, or clarifications. Outside of this, I keep my involvement to a minimum, modeling the teacher as a "skilled facilitator" (Clegg & Heap, 2006, p. 5 with a "restrained presence" (Vandergrift, 2002, p. 83 who guides the learning (Bruner, 1996). I consider much of this an online version of what I do in the brick-and-mortar classroom.

The facilitator role that I assume enables the students to lead the discussions, giving them the sense that the classroom is their place of learning. As Scarboro (2004) writes, "[s]tudents are responsible not only for their own learning and achievement but also for that of the class as a whole. The professor relinquishes the dictat role and joins the students, now as a participant" (p. 226). In fact, very often students will refer to my summaries in their responses, using some of the ideas as ways to develop their own. Moreover, reading their posts and responses gives me the opportunity to develop better, more engaging questions. Based upon their posts and the questions they raise, I am able to assess their level of understanding of the content. This helps me to redesign how I am communicating the ideas to them. I argue that these aspects have particularly important pedagogical implications for enabling students to develop and sustain a culture of learning as well as for creating a constructivist learning environment online.[1] Thus the discussion board, where written questions are posed and students are encouraged to write thoughtful responses as well as ask to more questions, is especially helpful in the construction of knowledge (Bruner, 1996), both the students' and mine.

Four Categories Of A Culture Of Learning

In this section I describe four interrelated categories that embody a culture of learning. In this sense, the online class has been transformed into what Bruner (1996) would call a "subcommunity of mutual learners" where "learners help each other learn, each according to her abilities" (p. 21). Bruner believes that in such a community, students gain not only subject mastery of course content, but also good judgment, self-reliance, and the ability to work well with one another. In the next section, I offer some examples of students' posts that exemplify these categories.

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1 It should be noted that Jaggars (2014) found that some community college students whom she interviewed expressed that they "taught themselves" (p. 27) the course material, suggesting that they did not experience some of these more positive student-directed experiences.

I call the first category *valuing the learning process*, defined as an expression of intellectual curiosity and self-reflection. This could take the form of students posing questions that take a concept or idea to the next level of abstraction or following up a question with a more complicated one. When one values the learning process, one is comfortable with changing one's mind or rethinking something using the conceptual language of the subject matter under consideration. There is an expressed respect for learning as an enlightened endeavor, not merely focused on outcomes; its importance and meaning is derived from an appreciation of the process itself.

A second category that emerges from the posts is *valuing collaborative learning*, defined as the importance of meaningful exchanges between students. In an onsite class this is often fostered when students work on a learning activity together in small groups. In this online class, it happens through students' responses to each others' posts. Often a student will build upon what another student has posted in order to further clarify the point. In doing so, students recognize what they have learned from someone else.

Related to this is the third category, *ownership over knowledge production*. Much of what students are learning is self-directed and demonstrates an active engagement with the material. This is revealed when students make connections to relevant ideas or concepts that they have learned in other classes or when they offer links to websites that relate to the topic. It can also be found in posts that draw on students' own experiences that affirm or negate the theory, concept, or idea under examination.

The final category is *thinking critically*. On the discussion board, students express what was difficult to understand, reflect on a reading, evaluate the ideas put forward, and/or see things from multiple perspectives. We can see this deliberation in the ways that students frame their posts, using phrases such as "What I don't understand is," "I'm not sure if I agree with that because," or "Does that mean then?"

These four categories represent the norms and values embodied in a culture of learning. When students value the process of acquiring knowledge and skills, they draw on the contributions of others. In doing so, they stake a claim in their own learning process, enabling them to think critically about what they know as they take in new ideas.

Documenting The Categories: Working With The Data

As stated above, the data presented in this study come from student work in an asynchronous online course (Introduction to Sociology) during the Spring 2009 and Spring 2010 semesters. The students in the classes signed an IRB approved consent form allowing me to include their posts or responses in this study. Out of two classes of 36 active students[2], 21 students granted their consent (58%). Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of the participating students. I have not corrected any

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2 Despite the aforementioned 25 class cap, there is a great deal of attrition in online courses, as has been documented elsewhere. Feedback from students confirm that one primary reason for withdrawing is that they were unaware how much work was involved in an online course and could not manage it with their other classes and responsibilities.

spelling or grammar, as I want these posts to reveal the students' authentic expressions, though I have edited down some of the passages for readability.

I begin each semester with an icebreaker. For instance, I ask students to share a brief summary of a movie they have recently viewed and their reactions to it. This sets an inviting tone and allows me to comment on how so many of the movies they discuss deal with sociological concepts that we will cover over the semester. As we move along and the students are introduced to those concepts, my questions become increasingly analytical, enabling the students to incorporate the ideas in deeper ways. For example, the question on gender socialization (see category II, valuing collaborative learning, below) asks the students to apply the concept of socialization which they learn in the second week of class to the ways in which we learn the norms and expectations of gender, a topic covered later in the semester. Many of the questions pertain to theories introduced in a chapter or readings that were assigned, and students are asked to draw on their personal experiences that relate to the concept or theory under review. In this way, students develop what we refer to as a sociological imagination (Mills 1959): the ability to see how one's personal experiences are enmeshed in larger social forces.

Category I. Valuing the learning process

Discussion board question: After reading the article by Deborah Tannen, share with us your reactions. What does this piece show us about the power of gender? If you can, include an example of a conversation you have had with a significant other or close friend or family member (or one that you have been a witness to) that is represented in this piece.

Student post: Reading Tannen's research was eye-opening for me. While reading it, I thought to myself that by studying and understanding gender differences in communication so many misunderstandings could be avoided…Tannen's Independence vs. Intimacy example made me smile, because that exact same thing happened to my husband and I. (Marisol)

Discussion board question: Be sure to read pgs. 175–182 in the Kimmel (2009) textbook and the lecture notes. Choose one theory of deviance or crime that you found interesting and discuss why you thought it was interesting. Did it change the way you thought about deviance or crime? Did it confirm what you always thought about deviance and crime?

Student post: One theory in this chapter that was fascinating to me was Emile Durkheim's argument for the necessity of deviant behavior. Durkheim argues that deviance helps society acknowledge what social norms and values are acceptable and those that are not; it shows us that we can not judge something as good without knowing what's bad, …. The entire chapter gave me a different outlook on deviant behaviors and criminal activities and I understand that all crimes are not committed by criminals. A man that is stealing food from the 7/11 convenience store may be trying to feed his wife and children, the stealing is a crime but I do not see the criminality in feeding a family. It is society's judgment that condemns us. (Nathan)

Analysis: Frequently I find that in their posts, students say that what they have read was "eye opening." Phrases like this represent intellectual curiosity and respect for learning as a process. In several of these examples, this appreciation is noticeable; the students provide thoughtful, self-reflective responses to my questions, sometimes taking concepts and ideas to the next level of abstraction and/or rethinking something using the conceptual language they are learning in the course.

Marisol revisits personal experiences using a deeper sociological understanding of gender not as a biological fact but as a social construction. She shows how our behaviors are affected by profound beliefs about gender and gender roles. Nathan draws on classical sociological theory to enrich his understanding of deviance, viewing it as a socially constructed process and appreciating how his thinking has evolved and matured. As both of these cases demonstrate, the online format allows students to deepen their appreciation for the process of learning.

Category II. Valuing collaborative learning

Discussion board question: Think about a specific example from your childhood or adolescence when you were taught the appropriate expectations of your gender, what the authors call "boy and girl code." What were the circumstances? How were these expectations expressed to you? Was it from your parents or family members, peers, members of the opposite sex, teachers, etc.? Describe how you were rewarded for acting according to these expectations and/or how you were "punished" for not acting according to these expectations.

Student Post: There was one day I recalled I was sitting down but I turned to speak to my cousin behind me. The next thing I know, I received a slap on the leg, got shushed, and was told "close your legs!" I turned around and did what I was told. On the way home my mom made it clear that little girls and women should not sit with their legs open. There was no rewards for sitting like a lady but there were repercussions such as spankings from everyone who knew you, from in church until you got home. (Francesca)

Response to Francesca's post (1): I can relate to your experience, it was not only my mother who would say that it would be teachers and relatives, but it was the same message they were trying to get through to me, girls don't sit like that, it was inappropriate and not lady like. I agree with Marisol too when she wrote that the way a child acts could be a reflection of the mother herself. With so called inappropriate behaviors, a mother would not want to be associated with those behaviors. This may be the reason that parents become so concerned with how their child whether boy or girl appear or act, they want them to act according to their gender and what is the norm of their society. (Bari)

Response to Francesca's post (2): It's funny that most of us "girls" chose this same issue. It takes one generation to make a difference, but bold moves have to be made. I've often dressed my daughter in a way that was disapproving of my mother and her paternal grandmother. I didn't like frilly dresses when I was younger and I didn't like her wearing them. Her hair had to be neat or I would get this response, "What would people think?" and "I never allowed you out of the house with messy hair."

(Simone)

Analysis: This exchange demonstrates a command of the sociological concept of gender socialization. In addition, it reveals the students' profound respect for one another as learning partners. It is clear that students were learning from and with each other. In response to Francesca's post, as well as Marisol's (not included), Bari analyzes the meanings behind the symbolic directive of sitting with your legs crossed, suggesting that mothers see their children's behaviors as a reflection on themselves and their parenting—a powerful aspect of the way in which motherhood is understood and practiced. Bari further enlarges the world of social influences, including teachers and extended family members as active agents of socialization—another context within which we learn the norms and expectations of our gender. Simone notes the common gendered experiences among so many of the women who had posted, writing about how she is raising her daughter differently, much to the dismay of her mother and grandmother. Her post also expresses the idea that while socialization is a powerful force influencing our behavior, these expectations and gender codes are malleable—an important aspect of understanding how gender is socially constructed. In this way, the students clarify this newly learned concept for each other, acting as much as teachers as learners. They acquire content knowledge through building relationships with others, reflecting a reverence for the collaborative process.

Category III. Ownership over knowledge production

Discussion board question: For this post, I would like you to discuss one topic that you read about in Chapter Eight (Kimmel textbook or lecture notes) that you found interesting, alarming—something you didn't know before. Briefly discuss this idea in your post (include page numbers so everyone can re-read if necessary) and share with us why you were interested in this idea. What questions does it raise or answer for you about the way we understand race and ethnicity sociologically?

Student Post: The one thing that stood out to me was Selective Perception…when someone who is prejudice comes across a minority person who contradicts the stereotype, they are viewed as an exclusion. As I read the lecture it brought many conversations I have had with people who would talk about certain types of people but it seems that they know of some one from that group but they always make an exemption for that person because he or she is different… For example I know someone who always has something to say about Dominican people, so I questioned her one day and asked her why she has negative things to say about Dominican people knowing her best friend is one. Her response was that her friend is not like the rest of them. She really contradicted herself that time. (Jazmine)

Discussion board question: Please go to: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYIh4MkcfJA and watch this video on Dr. Asch's experiment in social psychology (1955, p. 79 in Kimmel textbook). What does this experiment tell us about human social behavior? Can you think of an example where you were influenced by the "will" of the group to do something against your better judgment? What happened? What were your reactions to this experiment?

Student post: What this experiment tells us about human social behavior is that humans want to

be accepted in society and will sometimes go against their own better judgment to do so. However, humans would adjust their social behavior for different reasons, whether it is to save them from embarrassment, to appear intelligent or just simply to fit in. It was only last Friday when I was influenced by the "will" of the group. In my Creative Writing class the Professor called on one of my classmates and asked for his interpretation of the story. I agreed with his interpretation one hundred percent, however, when the professor asked if anyone agreed with him and I saw no one put their hands up, I kept my hand down too. It turned out that we were right and I felt stupid for denying my better judgment. I laughed at this experiment because it is so true; it definitely reminded me of my own episode last Friday. Groups are extremely influential, more so than one would like to admit. (Zamaris)

Analysis: In these two posts, the students are becoming enculturated into the practice of sociology (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). That is, they are demonstrating a clear understanding of the subject matter, but even more importantly, of engaging in sociological inquiry. This new conceptual language is not merely taught to them; they are learning important sociological concepts in the context of what sociologists do and think. Jazmine explores a meaningful concept, selective perception, that she found interesting by writing about an exchange with her friend who expresses the concept. And Zamaris is able to make sense of the influence that the group has on our behavior by connecting a recent experience she had in another class to Asch's (1955) classic experiment on group conformity. In both of these examples, the online discussion board is enabling an essential component of constructivist learning.

Category IV. Critical thinking

Discussion board question: After reading the three readings from the The New York Times Class Matters Series, write your reactions to all three readings. What did you find interesting, disturbing, shocking? What did you learn that you didn't know before?

<u>Student post:</u> While reading the statistics and the different theories explaining why one might be poor I was angered even more, words used like "lack of will, drive and discipline or nothing can change because there is nothing to strive for. I thought of the struggles I have experienced and friends that have it even harder. None of us lack in drive, discipline etc... We have even more to strive for, but the less money you have, the more you have to work and certain opportunities are passed by...There was an interesting theory I read in my psychology class… "Maslow's Hierachy of needs" …. A lot of this theory was maybe a little unbelievable for most of us, but after reading chapter 7 and the many theories behind social class, I couldn't help but go back to this theory. Our basic human needs is food, shelter, safety and water... If faced to struggle for these basic needs, an individuals time might only be spent trying to to meet these very basic needs to survive. Education, "savings" (that was laughable) and other needs to bring a person out of poverty and into working class or middle income is much harder to achieve. This is when you can see the inequalities that exist in our country and many others. (Yanna)

Discussion board question: Be sure to read pgs. 175–182 in the Kimmel textbook and the lec-

ture notes. Choose one theory of deviance or crime that you found interesting and discuss why you thought it was interesting. Did it change the way you thought about deviance or crime? Did it confirm what you always thought about deviance and crime?

Student post: Before reading about the Conflict Theory of crime I just assumed that laws were put in place to protect us "all" from wrong doing. Instead the Conflict Theory shows that the laws were written and put in place to protect the dominant class (or the socio-economically advantaged) giving them power to keep the subordinate class (or the socio-economically disadvantaged) down. When you stop to think about it, who is it that is writing and passing these laws anyway?…The example the author gives in the text book shows how the crime of stealing bread as a fraternity prank by a rich college student is dismissed with a slap on the wrist and yet if a poor person who really needed the bread were to commit the same crime because he was hungry and had no choice the judge would throw him in jail for ten years. This does not make sense except that the rich kid was indeed protected and the poor person would actually be pushed down so hard that it would make it difficult for him to ever rise up from his conditions. (Cristina)

Analysis: These passages exemplify the rudiments of critical thinking. Yanna is questioning assumptions she read about social class based upon her experience as part of the working class. She then connects a theory she learned in another class to make sense of the discussion, posing thoughtful questions. And Cristina challenges her own long-standing belief in the legal system, developing a critical understanding and drawing upon the conceptual knowledge discussed throughout the course. All of these examples demonstrate an understanding of the importance of the social context of a phenomenon, which is one of the foundations of sociological thought. The students show this by opening up to multiple perspectives.

Discussion Boards, Student Engagement, And A Culture Of Learning

These four overlapping categories are useful in demonstrating that a culture of learning can be created in an asynchronous online classroom. As these examples suggest, students are actively engaged in the course material, developing a mastery over the conceptual language and modes of inquiry while drawing on personal examples and experiences to deepen their understanding. There is a palpable reverence for learning as a process, receptivity to thinking about things in a new way, and an acknowledgment of the importance of a learning community. This is consistent with what others have written about distance learning (Benson et al., 2002; Jaffee, 2003; Persell, 2004; Scarboro, 2004). The students are really talking to each other, albeit via computer. Moreover, as these discussions are accessible throughout the semester, students may return to them. In fact, students are encouraged to incorporate them into their midterm and final exams.

When asked to write a substantive reaction to a reading, students do so with nuanced thought and active engagement. Often they go beyond what is required and research a discussion they found inter-

esting, suggest relevant books to read or movies to see, and provide links to recent newspaper articles on the topics being discussed. In this way, they develop as the experts of their own knowledge production, forming a community of learners in the process. They share ideas directly with each other rather than going through me. As Vandergrift (2002) states, "Thus, as a group, the class create[s] a web of relationships and a web of meanings that dramatically extend the personal and intellectual range of all participants" (p. 89). The students are learning that I am not the sole gatekeeper of the information. They do not need me to intervene as frequently as I tend to do (and am often expected to by students) in the onsite classroom. In fact, my online teaching experiences have helped me facilitate more and control less during discussions in my onsite classrooms. The online classroom, with its text-based interactions, allows, in a very real way, a more restrained presence of the teacher; it accordingly transmits important messages to students about their own abilities in making discoveries.

Concluding Thoughts: Spontaneity, Sensory Experiences, And The Hybrid Classroom

As the evidence in this paper suggests, a culture of learning is quite possible in an online community college classroom. Despite my earlier reservations, I now support online learning as an important feature among a wide range of opportunities, especially for the nontraditional students who enroll in institutions like my own.

However, I have a few lingering concerns about learning online rather than in a brick-and-mortar classroom. First, I miss the spontaneity of the onsite classroom—discussions that emerge from other discussions, going beyond the subject material but still relevant to it. As a teacher, I find such spontaneous conversations invaluable and invigorating. While tangential discussions happen online, they occur in asynchronous postings that become difficult to follow (Winiecki, 1999).

Even more than the spontaneity, though, the sensory experiences of learning that are difficult to translate to the online classroom are missing—hearing each others' voices, laughter, and the audible, collective "a-ha" moments of discovery and seeing the expressions of fellow students. I suggest that these sensory experiences enable teachers and students to connect with one another, are central to constructivist learning, and may have implications beyond the classroom. For example, in my experience, I find it much more challenging to write personalized letters of recommendation for my online students. I am also less likely to reach out to an online student about academically enriching opportunities, which I do frequently with my onsite students. This is consistent with Jaggars's (2014) findings that students felt disconnected from their online instructors, and may explain some of the attrition problems that have been documented in the online setting. In the context of the proliferation of online higher education courses, this raises some important questions: To what extent do online students miss out on creating these types of relationships and learning about such opportunities, and what overall effect might this have on students' academic and professional experiences? Such questions are particularly important for the nontraditional student, who may be less aware of such opportunities to begin with. Offering flexible and more accessible learning environments to students is certainly

important, but these concerns about online learning deserve more consideration.

I do think that as the technology advances, some of the sensory issues will be addressed. Examples like Screencasting and Voicethread offer ways for students and faculty to communicate through video and audio, rather than just in writing, thus personalizing some of the online experiences. Blackboard Collaborate is another tool that facilitates communication. I use it to hold weekly virtual office hours, where students can log on and ask me a question and I can reply immediately. However, despite the accessibility of Blackboard Collaborate, students seldom visit it, though this may be due to their competing responsibilities rather than the technology itself. Students who need to speak to me make it a point to come in to see me or, if that is not possible, to call me. They seem to want to make a more interactive connection with me, especially if they are struggling in the course.

Perhaps one way to bring together the best of what online and onsite classrooms each have to offer is through the hybrid classroom, which has been gaining momentum in community college course offerings (Dembicki, 2011). Combining online and onsite content delivery, hybrid courses may address some of the social relational challenges of the online classroom experience, especially at the community college. Consistent with Dewey's (1916) exposition of education as rooted in the idea of self-development emerging from social interaction, the hybrid classroom is a fruitful place for further research and reflection among those committed to constructivist pedagogies.

Acknowledgments

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