In Defense of Multiple Learning Spaces

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Paul Farber and Dini Metro-Roland's work rehabilitates authority as an asymmetrical relationship "between speaker and audience that permits certain speakers to command not just the attention but the confidence, respect, and trust of their audience, or — an important proviso — to make audiences act as *if* this were so."[1] The authors are concerned with authority effects: the ways a speaker and audience interact in moments of both reverence and defiance that exist because of the perceived authority of the speaker and is integral to an ideal learning and teaching experience. Thus, they suggest that we turn our attention to the question: what is the proper theater for authority effects? In what spaces are the effects of authority experienced in such a way as to promote learning? They suggest that material classroom spaces foster the proper effects of authority and online classroom spaces do not. While I am not sure that I completely agree with Farber and Metro-Roland's characterization of authority, due to the limits of space, I take issue with the idea that material spaces are, by their nature, conducive to positive effects of authority and online spaces, by their very nature, are not.

Farber and Metro-Roland suggest that "the drama of asymmetrical relationships" has distinctive features and works best as a performance in a traditional classroom. According to the authors, these distinctive features include the experience of "spatial-temporal encapsulation." This is the idea that the set place and the set time create an "interval" where students can more fully "attend to the matter at hand." The theater of the traditional classroom, according to the authors, includes the opportunity to watch and be watched; it includes an expectation of "human action and human relationships," or that all will play an active role in learning. Also, because all of the participants are visible to each other, there is an expectation of at least feigned respect for the authority figure and for one's fellow classmates. I think that Farber and Metro-Roland are spot on when they suggest that creating the sense of an interval, creating the expectation of human relationships and action, and creating a space of at least the performance of respect for authority, are all integral to an ideal learning environment. However, I am not convinced that all of these characteristics are natural to the traditional classroom.

I have been both a student and a teacher in a traditional classroom space. I have had those moments were I feel like everyone is contributing to the learning environment. I viscerally understand the need to break away from daily life and attend to a space of learning. I know what it is to be in awe of my teacher and even what it is to feel like my students truly respect and honor me. However, I have also been in traditional classrooms that were less ideal. I have seen students text and use Facebook throughout class, to the complete oblivion of the teacher. I have *been* the student who cannot quite pull my head away from something else going on in my life. I have been in a classroom where the teacher did not know my name let alone have

a relationship with me. I have sat in the spatial-temporal moment of the classroom and convincingly nodded my head without any regard to what was going on. Not all traditional classroom spaces come close to the ideal set forth by the authors.

The ideal suggested by Farber and Metro-Roland is just that — an ideal. However, just because I teach or learn in a material classroom does not guarantee that I will experience the interval, activity, relationships, and respect that are lauded by Farber and Metro-Roland. Also, just because I teach or learn in an online environment doesn't mean that the ideal is out of reach. I have personal experience both as a teacher and as a student in online environments so I understand that, just like with traditional classrooms, not all online classrooms are positive experiences. However, online environments *can* create positive moments of learning; they can be those spaces of interval, relationship, authority, and respect lauded by the authors.

Online classes actualize the spatial-temporal interval in a similar way to traditional classrooms. For synchronous learning sessions, there is a set time for the class that often echoes the same time frames of traditional classes. While the synchronous sessions may not happen for teachers and students in the same place, they do not happen in a vacuum. The social imaginary and years of personal experience in a classroom overlay and shape expectations of how to act and react in a classroom — even an online classroom. As a student or a teacher, I am aware that there is a certain level of attentiveness, respect, care, and even vulnerability that goes into a positive learning experience. This same awareness exists online. As a student or teacher, I create a mental "interval" for myself that allows me to attend to the matter at hand. I might add that I think it is the mental interval that we create for ourselves — the intention to be open and learn — that allows us to access that special space of learning mentioned by the authors. Intentionality is important to learning; intentionality to learn can exist in many spaces that are not the material classroom. I am convinced that the learning interval can exist regardless of whether we are in an old building on campus, or in one's own bedroom.

I am *not* convinced that there is a decrease in interaction and relationships between students and teachers in online environments. In fact, in some ways the online environment does a better job of producing the performance (the drama) of relationships. One has but to peruse the posts on a class blog or forum to see that all kinds of intimate stories and feelings are expressed — perhaps it is a bit of Facebook-syndrome transferring to the online classroom. Online, I have access to the stories and thoughts of all of the students in the class around a given topic. This is in contrast to the material classroom where, often, only a few of the students give their stories and thoughts. In my experience, I actually get more *intimate* and *thorough* engagement in online spaces. This online intimacy may be because some people feel more comfortable expressing themselves in the faceless and controlled environment of the online post. On the other hand (or, in addition) it may be because the teacher's authority requires students to be more overt in their communication and connection in an online environment.

In a traditional classroom, the teacher does not often keep close track of who spoke, for how long, and what was said. So, it is possible to sit in the traditional

classroom and yet not watch, interact, or in any *real* way be present in the class without much effect on the student's grade. On the other hand, in online classrooms, as part of the built environment, there is a record kept of all interaction. The students know that the teacher has access to a record of their participation. The watching and being watched that happens between students and teachers becomes, perhaps, more overt. The combination of the teacher's authority to grade and evaluate, and the increased translucence of participation in an online environment, tends to create at least the performance of interaction and active interest. Activity actually increases in online spaces.

Authority and authority effects also exist, in very meaningful ways, in online spaces. In online classrooms, the teacher still controls the "flow of information." The teacher chooses to direct the conversation down particular avenues or let the students take a more defining hand in the process. The students still ask the teacher questions and look to the teacher as an expert — or at least perform the act of looking to the teacher as an expert. The teacher still grades the students, thus creating an obvious asymmetrical power relationship. Online students participate in the "asking" and referencing of authority that Farber and Metro-Roland define as one of the hallmarks of the asymmetrical authority relationship.

Authority, relationships, activity, and the power of an interval-set-aside for learning are all extremely important. They all proliferate and even thrive in online environments. The theaters of learning might look different, but the same types of relationships exist nonetheless. I applaud Farber and Metro-Roland for delving into questions of what makes online learning different from learning in the material classroom. I think they point to some interesting concepts that need to be considered as we create online learning spaces in the future. I also agree with the authors that there *are* vital differences between online and traditional classrooms that need exploration. However, putting one's finger on the differences is tricky — especially since what constitutes an online classroom and a traditional classroom varies greatly and is evolving quickly. I cannot agree that the difference between the online space and the material space is that one space produces authority, authoritative effects, authoritative relationships and engagement, and the other does not. I do look forward to continuing, with the authors, in the search for exactly what the differences are, why they are, and how they matter.

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1. Bruce Lincoln, *Authority* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4.