How Techne Shapes Bodies in a Classroom

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Introduction

In this paper, I want to draw attention to the ways that bodies are used, shaped, and imagined in the classroom. I focus on both the bodies of teachers and of students. I see this paper as an extension of the debate over whether or not distance or online classrooms can ever really be as productive a space as a material classroom. For this reason, I will focus on what happens to the body in both material and online spaces—paying closer attention to what happens to the body in material classroom spaces because it is the physical body in the physical classroom that is often invoked as the reason why material educational spaces are always/already better than online educational spaces. In this paper, I talk about technologies—and I mean several things by this word. I talk about technology in the digital sense: the use of technology to create an online classroom environment. I talk about technology in the material sense; using the word techne—in the classical sense of the word—in order to draw attention to the ways that material objects act as tools to create and shape particular types of bodies. I also use technologies in the discursive sense; drawing on Foucault’s notion of technologies of discipline. I begin by focusing on the debate over material versus online classroom spaces. I will use this as jumping off point for further exploration of how technologies shape bodies in a classroom.

The Debate

In the late eighties, nineties and early 2000s, there were many claims that technology and the World Wide Web would revolutionize education and completely change the way we learned and taught. Barker (1987) suggested that the World Wide Web would revolutionize the lack of resources experienced by most rural schools. Batey and Cowell (1986) advocated the idea that the web would provide greater access to information for all schools, thus closing the achievement gap. Chute, Brunning, and Hulick (1984) conducted extensive tests that showed that students who were taught using a distance-method of learning tended to show greater achievement on tests than those who were taught in material classrooms. This, of course, led to quite a lot more research and even more lofty political claims that technology would end bad teaching. Technology and the web could substitute for—perhaps even replace—a teacher when needed. And then, there were even some who advanced the spurious claim that, online, one could become disembodied and, thus, become free to experience learning and the self in a whole new way (see Bessiere, Seay, and Kiesler (2007)). At roughly the same time, there began to emerge counter arguments suggesting that learning was only truly possible when physical bodies met together in the same physical space. Online learning was positioned as information exchange—and not ‘real’ learning. Online teaching was considered an exercise in de-humanization because bodies were never really present.

While in the past ten years, more has been written in acknowledgment of the embodiment that
exists even while we are online (see Nakamura, 2002; Terranova, 2000; Greenhalgh-Spencer, 2010), there are still many critics of online education who suggest that online spaces are not really embodied learning spaces. They suggest that real education only happens when bodies are physically present—together. Because my paper is, in some ways, a critique of the discourse deployed by naysayers of online education, I want to spend some time unpacking and recounting some of the expositions made against online education.

It is interesting to note that, even in the early 2000’s, critics of online education were touting the importance of the body as a reason to continue schooling in traditional classrooms and forgo education in online spaces. In 2001, Dreyfus argues that physical presence—a being physically together in the same space—is necessary in order to truly acquire skills, learn relevant information, know and understand reality, and create meaningful relationships—a meaningful life. Anderson (2008), advocates the “importance of the body in establishing and maintaining human relations;” he also emphasizes “the central importance of the body in one’s personal self-identity as well as in initiating and maintaining intersubjective bonds in human communities” (p. 153). Because of the centrality of the body to learning, Anderson (2008) concludes that cyberspace and its so-called communities of learners are actually “detrimental to establishing intimate lasting human communities” (p. 153). Anderson (2008) sums up his argument by considering: “virtual communities by comparison to real ones to be abstract, diminished, fragile and tenuous relationships, easily broken precisely because they lack the concrete situatedness of embodied subjectivity and intersubjectivity” (p. 156). So, we learn from multiple critics that the body is important and, because of the body’s importance to learning, online spaces can never be fully educational.

Dreyfus (2002, 2004, 2006) furthers this critique by claiming that online education is but an anemic simulation of the real, embodied, experience of the traditional classroom. Dreyfus (2002), suggests that the traditional classroom creates an atmosphere of learning because it is an atmosphere where, of necessity, people take social risks, and make social commitments, by choosing to engage with each other in a conversation. Dreyfus (2002) suggests:

Only those willing to take risks go on to become experts. It follows that, since expertise can only be acquired through involved engagement with actual situations, the possibility of acquiring expertise is lost in the disengaged discussions and deracinated knowledge acquisition characteristic of the Net. Not only is the detached learner unable to acquire specific disciplinary skills, but, for the same reason, such a learner could not acquire the general skills for getting around in the world and getting on with others that Aristotle calls phronesis or practical wisdom.(p. 374)

Dreyfus (2002) is sure that learning can only take place when bodies work in nearness to each other. Says Dreyfus (2002), “As far as I can see, learning by apprenticeship can work only in the nearness of the classroom and laboratory; never in cyberspace” (p. 377). From here, I’d like to point out one more critique of online education.

Barnacle (2009) draws on the work of Dreyfus and Gallagher to suggest that, in our engagement
and negotiation with others in a social space, we actually create the knowledge structures necessary for other types of knowledge:

the mode of engagement with others that occurs in the negotiation of social norms itself provides the basis for the more formal, conceptual, mode of engagement characteristic of the deployment of propositional knowledge. What Dreyfus calls ‘embodied intentionality’ forms the basis of all propositional knowledge in that it is the driver for the establishment of new forms of understanding. Crucially, then, not only are formal and embodied knowing integrated but the former is dependent on the latter. (Barnacle, 2009, pp. 29-30).

As Barnacle (2009) points out, all learning is embodied learning. And yet, once again her paper draws on and continues the critique of online spaces as—some how—impoverished of bodies. Hence, we have a particular line of critique—a particular side of the debate—that places online education as opposed to embodied learning. Thus, online education is framed as disembodied and education that takes place in a material classroom is framed as both embodied and the type of education that is “real” education because it draws on the body in order to learn.

While I agree that bodies are important for learning—that we learn through our embodied experiences—I want to trace out some of the “learning” that our bodies do in a material classroom space as well as an online space. How is our body actually used or practiced in a traditional classroom space and an online space? Is the type of embodied schooling that goes on in a traditional classroom really what we want to call empowered and positive learning? I’d like, now, to give a sort of thick description of what happens in actual material classrooms. I will start with a short vignette: a story meant to draw attention to the ways that I, as the teacher in a material space, am shaped by the technologies of the material classroom. I will then proceed to draw closer attention to some of the technie/technolgies of the material classroom that shape bodies.

**Vignette: In a Traditional Classroom Space**

I don't take up that much space. I am only 5'4”, and even in my grown-up-girl-heels, I'm only about 5'6”. This means that most of my students stand at my height or taller. So, when a student comes up to me to talk at the end of class, I regularly feel short or little. I think I place my hands on my hips when this happens (symbol of authority) as a way to compensate. My height also means that, at times, I have to reach up, on toes and with arm out-stretched, to write on the chalkboard. While reaching for the top of the board, I wonder if my dress has managed to show a little too much leg.

In some of the classrooms, there is a small rope used to pull down the projection screen. Sometimes the rope gets placed on the top lip of the chalkboard so as not to obscure the teacher's writing when the screen is up. I hate this, because it means I have to jump up to try and fish the rope off the chalkboard lip whenever I want to pull the screen down. For some reason, jumping makes me feel like a child. Then, if one of my taller male students volunteers to get it down for me, I become hyper-aware of my status as female.
There is also the fact that I'm blonde. I'm not really sure what this means or how this translates. I will only say that, being blonde, I tend to be a little sensitive about the ditzy, naïve, hyper-sexual stereotypes that come along with it. Whenever I make a dumb mistake in front of my students, I wonder, did I just get encoded as a ditzy blonde? This also means that I stand in front of the mirror and internally debate about whether or not I should undo that second button on my shirt.

And then, in contrast to my small-ish, blonde, female body, there is my voice. Somehow, subconsciously, I have developed this lower, confident, perhaps-a-little-intimidating, professor-voice. I use it in all of the classes I teach on campus and on-line. I'm not sure to what lengths I can characterize my own voice. I can only say, I notice a definite difference between the voice I use to teach academic classes and the voice I use to teach yoga. Then, both of these voices are different from the one I use with friends and family. I have a rather female-coded body and this rather male-coded academic voice. I wonder how this seeming-dichotomy affects my students.

I'm also completely aware that my body bears all the marks of middle-class whiteness. I look the part of the oppressor. So, when I talk about social justice issues, dialogue, and counter-hegemonic practice—do I come off as insincere? Am I nothing but a poseur? Will my body allow me to be anything but the enemy? I feel gazed-at whenever I, as a white body, try to talk about oppression and emancipation; hegemony and counter-hegemonic stances. Quite literally, I feel the gaze of my students.

I feel this gaze on my physical body, as a physical body—and because my physical body stands in particular spatial and power relationships vis a vis my students. It doesn't seem to matter whether I arrange the desks in my classroom in rows, in tables, or in a circle—the eyes and even bodily gestures reference me as the object of their gaze or attention. Even when I am having my students give presentations, or having them talk to each other in groups, there are always the quick eye movements that look to me (to check to see where I am? To check to see if I approve?). I become the axis around which their gazes orient. Like the North Star, my students seem to look to my body to exhibit some sort of fleshy direction.

And my body is not the only object that exerts polarity. My body moves in orbit around, in between, in front of, the bodies/objects in my class. When the chairs are in rows, I tend to stand at the front of the class. When the chairs are in a circle, I tend to sit. When the desks are in tables, I tend to wander around the room. When a group of people are talking out of turn, I tend to go over in that direction. My body moves and my postures vary depending on the other bodies/objects in the room.

Sometimes, as a way to symbolically give up my power and create an equal and equally shared space, I sit with the students and try to encourage other bodies to take charge of discussions or presentations within the space of the class. Symbolically, I make the move to undercut my power in the classroom. Perhaps even, intellectually, I believe this symbolic move creates a feeling of equality. However, as I've noted before, my symbolic power is revealed in the way the students' gaze follows me. I'm always/already 'in front,' even while my physical body does the labor of moving from place to place, sitting, standing, jumping, moving, still.
The Shaping of the Body by Techne/Technologies

The above vignette was meant to draw attention to the ways that bodies do, in fact, become shaped or pushed to labor in specific ways through the technologies of power and tecnhe objects that exist in material spaces. I would now like to take an even closer look at at this shaping. I want to excavate the ways that some very common technologies of power (in both material and discursive form) shape bodies. I take as my examples: the gaze, the chair, the desk, and the ability to move/touch. My examples apply to both the bodies of teachers and of students—but they tend to work more particularly on the bodies of students as the students tend to be at the wrong end of a binary of power in the classroom. I begin by talking about the ways that the gaze operates in the space of the material classroom.

The Gaze

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977/1995) considers that technologies of discipline presuppose “a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power” (pp. 170-171). This is to say, that the power to train or discipline a body becomes most effective through the “exact observation” of that body (Foucault, 1977/1995, p. 171). Says Foucault (1977/1995):

The perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly. A central point would be both the source of light illuminating everything, and a locus of convergence for everything that must be known; a perfect eye that nothing would escape and a centre towards which all gazes would be turned (p. 173).

This description of the perfect apparatus of power to discipline bodies sounds remarkably like the traditional classroom space.

In the material classroom, students desks are usually situated to always face the teacher. The students are positioned to view the teacher as the locus of knowledge—physically positioned to face the teacher—the front of the room. Even when the teacher moves around the room, the students will tend to follow the teacher with their eyes. The landscape of the classroom dictates a traditional power structure where the teacher is able to observe the bodies of the students, and students are able to locate the teacher’s body as the locus of information. For example, think about how often you can enter a classroom and tell where the “front” of the room is meant to be. While rooms may have several walls of chalkboards or learning stations, there is often a larger desk, a more central chair, the location of a movie projector, or some other object that locates *how* the classroom should be situated in order that the students may be fully observed and the teacher may be fully followed.

In the traditional classroom space, students’ bodies are meant to be fully visible. It is that very visibility that is supposed to act as a dissuasion from texting, Facebooking, talking out of turn, daydreaming, or doing any number of things other than focusing on the teacher. While it would be nice to say that the visibility that goes on in a traditional classroom space makes it possible for people to read body language in order to better understand the students, often this “reading of
“body language” is done as a means of finding out who is paying attention and who is not. In other words, often, in the classroom, visibility functions as a disciplinary technique more than a technique of loving atunement to or dialogue with one’s fellows. In the traditional classroom, the body is made visible in order to have power over; rather than to empower, students. Something similar can be said about the ways that bodies are situated and shaped by chairs within a traditional classroom.

Chairs
Chairs function to discipline, normalize, and captivate the body—especially within a traditional classroom space. I would not be the first to critique the ways that chairs seem to specify a particular type of labor within a classroom. Dewey (1900/1990) notes in The School and the Society, that some chairs are made for listening and some chairs are made for actual work—actual learning. Dewey (1900/1990) suggests that chairs have a way of shaping students—shaping their bodies to become a particular type of learner. In addition to philosophers, kinesiologists and social-physiologists have also offered a critique of the chair in the classroom.

Jonathan Crary (2000) posits that, since the nineteenth century, Western Modernity has insisted that “individuals define and shape themselves in terms of a capacity for ‘paying attention,’ that is, for a disengagement from a broader field of attraction, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focusing on a reduced number of stimuli” (p. 1). The ways in which we “accomplish certain productive, creative, or pedagogical tasks” links in to power, ideologies, and histories (Crary, 2000, p. 1). Crary (2000) deliberately points to the schoolroom bench/chair as a technology that functions in a way “that insures a subject is productive, manageable, and predictable” (Crary, 2000, p. 4). That is to say, the chair in the schoolroom attempts to literally shape a student who shuts off sensory perception in order to ‘pay attention’ to what is going on in the classroom. The chair literally positions the body to look forward, remain still, and be accessible. The chair also teaches the body through habituation to stop noticing other signals or stimuli around the body.

Galen Cranz (2000) talks more about the ways the chair actively erases the perceptions of the body—erases the ability of the body to feel and know itself. Cranz (2000) posits “that years of sitting in chairs have contributed significantly to this problem [of kinesthetic awareness] because chair sitting distorts and reduces ... perception of comfort” (p. 93). Cranz (2000) suggests that, in order to successfully sit in chairs, especially for long periods of time and on a regular basis, we must teach our bodies to ignore signals of pain and discomfort. We must teach ourselves to, literally, ignore the feelings and perceptions of the body. This bodily captivty—made possible through the chair—goes on because we are societally taught that it is expected that the body must be made captive in order to more fully ‘pay attention’—pay attention to our work; pay attention to those who are giving us knowledge; pay attention to authority. The act of paying attention is discursively aligned with the act of sitting still, being quiet, tuning other things out, and focusing forward. This is problematic, says Cranz (2000), because chairs hurt.

Cranz (2000) spends a lot of time tracing out exactly why and how chairs are harmful. Interestingly, she notes that her work specifically focuses on chairs—the kind you would find in
a classroom—and not on recliners, or lounge chairs, or anything that is actually designed for the ergonomics of the human body. Chairs were not designed for the human body; they were designed as works of art or symbols of status, which "may have been harmless when people sat on chairs for special occasions. But now that people sit on chairs all day, their legacy as vehicles for the expression of status has become physiologically harmful" (Cranz, 2000, p.p. 97-98). Chairs tend to compact the head-neck jointure. "Any chair that puts people in a posture that distorts this joint upsets the equilibrium of the entire body" (Cranz, 2000, p. 92). The problems of this off-kilter posture "include back ache, neck ache, problems with vocal production, eye strain, sciatica, shallow breathing" (p. 92). Often, chairs are canted backward; conditioning the body to slump back in the chair rather than sit with a tall spine. Chairs—specifically classroom and office chairs—cause "thoracic humping" where the neck and upper back must slump forward in order to counteract the backward canting of the chair. This move to bring the head forward causes such strain on the neck that, often, people will then move the upper chest forward in order to relieve strain on the neck. "This then collapses the ribcage over the abdominal region and exaggerates the curve in the mid-back" (Cranz, 2000, p. 95). This will often lead to back injuries such as: Gleno-Humeral tension; migration of the scapulae; cervical lordosis; brachial plexus compression; prolapsed discs; disc protrusion; spinal stenosis; and collapsed vertebrae. All of these injuries can result from repeated and inappropriate alignment of the spine and neck. Repeated and prolonged tension on the vertebrae—produced from a slumped over or tucked under sitting position—often results in disc and vertebrae injury, and neck and back pain.

So, once again, I want to draw attention to the ways the body is actually practiced and used in the traditional classroom. Most often, bodies are not used to do some sort of kinesthetic performance that leads to a deeper understanding of truths—a deeper and more relevant learning. Bodies, most often, are not used to find deeper levels of intimacy and relationality between students and teachers. Often, bodies are used—made to fit within a chair, forced to stay in that chair, and conditioned to ignore the perceptions of the body in order to more fully focus on the information delivered by the teacher. Chairs forge our bodies into painful contortions, and at the same time, teach us to ignore that pain—all in the name of the spectacle of paying attention. Desks do a very similar job.

Desks
Hetrick and Attig (2009) write extensively about the myriad ways that "desks hurt us" (p. 197). And while Hetrick and Attig (2009) focus their research on the ways that desks confine and shame the ‘fat body,’ I find that much of their work and observations extend to the ways desks work on all bodies. Regardless of body weight, desks are not “neutral and benign spaces; they are, rather, highly active material and discursive constructions that seek to both indoctrinate students’ bodies and minds into the middle-class values of restraint and discipline, and inscribe these messages onto the bodies that sit in them” (Hetrick and Attig, 2009, p. 197). Desks function to both physically shape the body and socially normalize particular types of bodies.
Bodies are highlighted as transgressive when we must contort our bodies to get in and out of the desks. Bodies are noticeably out the moment we feel too big, too tall, too fidgety, to comfortably contain the body under or within the space that the desk prescribes. Bodies are made visible as abnormal the moment they overflow or move out of the space of the desk. This is to say nothing of the ways that disabled bodies, or even left-handed bodies, are pinpointed as ‘not normal’ in the classroom space where desks assume mobile, small, and right-handed bodies. The desk makes bodies visible only through the matrix of ab/normalcy.

The desk serves as a symbol of conformity; extirpating any individuality among students. The stadium seating to be found in many of the large lecture halls at the university serve to both contain students, but also ensure their individual effacement as they become no longer individually perceiving people, but part of the vast sea of faces that is ‘the student body’. Even the non-stadium seating desk/chairs common in many university classroom ensure a self-imposed controlling of any part of the body that does not seem to fit within or under the desk space. To go back to Crary’s (2000) work, we are willing to contort our bodies in order to be counted as one who is ‘paying attention’. In addition to directly fashioning the body as a docile, quiescent, mind/subject, desks hurt the body.

The desk/chair combination creates a space of “hard materials” and “punishing shapes” (Hetrick and Attig, 2009, p. 199). The wood, plastic, and metal of the desk precisely surrounds most of the student’s body. This makes moving from side to side, or even bending over to fetch something from a backpack, almost impossible. The desk is actually placed quite low vis a vis the chair, which causes people with long legs to have to round their back more fully in order to comfortably fit the legs under the desk. This rounding of the back can lead to the back aches and other problems listed in the section above. The placement of these desks also means that many people have to lean forward, slouch to the side, and, once again, round their backs, in order to rest their elbows on the desk. And, the act of resting the elbows is conditioned by the fact that the desk surrounds the body in such a way as to make it awkward to place the hands at the sides, in the lap, or any where other than on the desk. This further shapes the body into a hunched over position—leading to strain and compacting of the vertebra. The desks produce a painful posture in the body. Because we have become so habituated by these desks, we barely notice that our bodies are uncomfortable in them.

The desks and chairs of the classroom coerce, make visible, normalize, and physically shape the body of the student. The materiality of the desks and chairs mold the student’s body into the visible and receptive subject necessary for the school. Not only that, but the desks and chairs tend to forbid a very human aspect of flesh—of people. Perhaps one of the more enjoyable and humanizing aspects of being together—in the same physical space—is the potentiality of moving together; of touching. These desks and chairs (incarnations of societal norms about the acceptability of touching) inhibit moving and touching. Here, I’d like to say a bit more about the importance of movement and touch in a learning environment in order to illuminate another way that the traditional classroom actually works against a positive learning space.
The Ability to Move and Touch

Nunez and Freeman (1999), Clark (1999), Iverson and Thelen (1999), and especially Sheets-Johnstone (1999; 2000) have all written extensively on the importance of movement and touch to the acts of learning and cognition. In order to fully understand objects, and the self-object relationship, we must be able to move around said objects and touch them. Not only that, but the very act of moving strengthens our brain’s ability to make connections between what we see, what we think, and how we reason (Sheets-Johnstone, 2000). This is because, as we move, not only does our body take on a greater sense of awareness of the world (in order that we won’t run into something or be harmed by something), but we are more likely to come into contact with (touch) other objects or subjects in the world.

As has been noted, desks and chairs actually prohibit movement and the potential for touch. Desks and chairs serve to confine students within a defined space. Thus, desks actively prohibit students from touching other objects in the classroom—in the world. Desks prohibit movement around and in between the spaces of the classroom. But, in addition to the actual objects of desks and chairs, there are also societal proscriptions against touching and moving.

Think of how often movement is limited within a traditional classroom space—not by the actual objects of the classroom, but by the teacher’s eye—by societal norms. I have been in classrooms where the fidgeting of students is called out as being “disruptive”. I know the moment (as both the teacher and a student in this scenario) when the teacher looks askance at a student who cannot seem to hold the body still. What does it say about a traditional classroom structure when the most movement students tend to experience is on the walk from one class to another? How and why does the traditional material classroom space signify embodiment, if this classroom structure so rarely allows for the movement of the body? Bodies in the traditional classroom space are not only limited in when and how they can move, they are also limited in their ability to touch.

I recently had an interesting conversation with colleagues about the appropriateness of touch in the classroom. Several question arose: Are you allowed to hug your students? What if you are a male, does that change what you are allowed to do? What if you are out as homosexual, does that change how and whom you are allowed to touch? Do the same rules that might apply to college students and teachers apply to the secondary school? What about the primary school? As we talked, it was clear that we all each shared a—somewhat contestable—rubric around what, how, and if touching was allowed.

So often, the critics of online education argue that distance learning is inferior to the traditional classroom because it happens at a distance. There is no presence of bodies together. But then, what does this presence matter if those bodies—while together in this traditional space—are coerced, normalized, made to be visible, shaped, injured, enclosed, and precluded from touching? Thus, the traditional classroom can hardly be said to serve the body in any humanizing way. Hence, it seems curious that the body, and being embodied, is so often deployed as the reason we should venerate the traditional classroom space above the online classroom space. When advocates of the traditional classroom invoke the body as the reason why traditional
classroom spaces are superior to virtual spaces, what kind of body is being invoked?

I now turn to another educational space: the online space. I do not want to reify the binary of material and online spaces (after all, so may material spaces use online components and more and more even distance education classes require face-to-face meetings for several days during the class. In other words, there are blended environments.) However, the current debate tends to place these two spaces in opposition to each other. And, while it is important to question this kind of binary, I find that—at the moment—it is even more important to question how the body is being invoked in this debate. Thus, I want to parse out some of the ways the body is shaped by and imagined in the online classroom space. I begin, once again, with a vignette: a story focused on the ways that I have experienced the online classroom as a student. I will then highlight the ways that the online space offers a moment of choice.

Vignette: In an Online Classroom Space

As an online student, I sit on the floor of my bedroom, my back propped against my bed, and my legs sprawled wide—which is how I think and write best. The floor around me is covered with journal articles and notepaper; the stuff I use to underline key phrases from the readings and write notes to myself. I also have a water bottle nearby as I tend to get thirsty during this three hour class. I have a pile of books to the right of my leg, and my computer at the center; ready to engage. The detritus of notes, schoolwork, and my body takes up fully twenty square feet of carpet space.

I can make the choice as to whether to turn on my computer’s camera, making me visible to everyone in class, or to become less visible; allowing myself to fully focus on the voices, on the text, and on the discussion. This choice of options also means that, if I am feeling a little shy about my appearance, I am not forced to spectacularize myself just to be part of the discussion. If I choose, I can turn on the camera and add my visible face to my audible voice—allowing all to see my body language when I talk. On the other hand, I can also choose to be more covered; to become—metaphorically speaking—the kid who sits in the back of the class and tries not to be noticed.

My body moves: alternating from a wide-leg posture to a cross-legged posture and back again. About an hour into the class I get off the floor and stand up. I need just a moment to stretch. I reach my arms high overhead, rotate my neck around in circles, and walk around for just a moment to provide a little movement—a little motion—to help me get focused and ready to think some more. I am able to do this stretching without interrupting the class, or missing parts of the discussion. This is good, because during the course of a normal three hour class I will go through this stretching/moving ritual three or four times at least.

I also like the way I get to hear the thoughts of more people in the class. More people participate in online classes because people write in the text boxes and voice their opinions as part of the synchronous discussion. I take a moment to think about how I want to respond to the teacher’s latest question. And after taking some time to change the wording of my response, I send it off. I
wiggle my toes in anticipation of what my other classmates will think of my response.

**Online Educational Space and the Possibility of Choice**

In the above vignette, I try to show that bodies are, in fact, present, moving, standing, sitting, physicalities. The online classroom is not a disembodied experience. Rather, it is a space of learning where the body operates differently. Usually, it is a space where the body has a wider array of choice and a greater position of power vis a vis the actual learning space.

While online education can still be a less than empowering experience, it *still* offers the potential for choice in ways not possible in the traditional classroom. As I have been both a student and a teacher in online classroom spaces, I have been struck by the ways I move my body differently in the online space. Online, I am free to get up, walk around, sit on the floor, sit on an exercise ball, sit on a chair made for my body, use a desk, use a book, use my computer, shift position, fidget, make faces—all of this without the strictures of the material classroom space. Indeed, while the online space does not guarantee that I will have good posture and that I will move my body—it does at least offer this as a choice. While I may choose, as an online student or teacher, to sit in a bad desk, use a bad chair, stay still and seated, and make myself visible—I may also choose not to do these things. I have the choice, through the use of my webcam, to make myself visible to students and teachers, or not. I have the choice to sit in a chair that encourages better posture, or not. I have the choice to use a desk that is proportioned for my body, or not. I have the choice to move around the room, or not. (Interestingly, I do *not* have the choice to reach out and touch fellow students, but, while there is the potential for bodily touch in the material classroom, rarely does this bodily touch actually happen.) While online education may not be the answer to all of the problems I have listed about education in a traditional classroom space, at least online education offers some affordances only possible in the online space—affordances that may make the educational experience more empowering; more embodied.

More work needs to be done to parse out what the online space offers, what is inherent in the traditional classroom space, and what kinds of educational spaces are yet to be fully used. We need to enlarge and enrich the debate over online education by asking: What is made possible, and what is made awkward or unlikely in these various spaces? The focus should be on a deeper understanding of what every modality brings to the table—and not on a rush to condemn or laud one modality above another. We should maintain a focus on the ways that the body is interpolated within educational spaces; but not rush to decide that the material classroom involves a humanizing bodily experience while the online classroom involves a disembodied experience. I look forward to continuing this debate; but using a more complex way of looking at bodies and technologies in the classroom.
References


