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## “I PREFER FACE-TO-FACE”: COMEDIC MOMENTS IN TEACHING ON-LINE

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**ABSTRACT:** This script presents comedic moments experienced by professors teaching online. We examine instructor experiences of the “wheel of death,” the “hermeneutic circle of support,” the phenomenon of students taking coursework for purposes of convenience, instructors’ felt needs to always be at others’ service 24/7, and how instructors respond to students’ self-evident questions. In this short scene about learning to teach online, all characters appearing are fictitious. We share this with others because we argue that comedy is an effective way to respond to some of the challenges we have faced in learning to teach online.

**KEYWORDS:** Dramatic script; Comedy; Teaching online; Non-traditional qualitative inquiry

## Notes on the Script and Performance

The autoethnographic fictional script below was co-written to relate some of our experiences over the past six years as we have learned to teach qualitative research methods online. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental. The characters do not represent real persons. The issues that are depicted, however, are those that we have actually experienced.

The purpose of “I Prefer Face-to-Face”: Comedic Moments in Teaching On-line,” is to provoke moments of laughter about some serious issues. In our experience as online teachers we have encountered moments of guilt, frustration, anxiety, and even anger as we have worked through the challenges of learning how to teach effectively in online contexts with a range of new tools. Although we envisioned the online program we developed as principally catering to distance students, in reality, distance students have not been our main audience. To our surprise, the online courses have attracted on-campus students who have easy access to face-to-face instruction, but who choose for a variety of reasons — including convenience, flexibility of scheduling, management of family responsibilities, or recommendations from peers — to take online coursework, even if online instruction is not a preferred mode of learning. For example, in our ongoing research examining online delivery of qualitative coursework, multiple students have described prior experiences with online coursework negatively, yet have still chosen to take an online course. In contrast, when asked why they had elected to take an online course, commuters who lived far from campus have highlighted rationales for taking coursework that did not include saving commuting time. We have learned that students’ reasons for selecting online coursework are complex and varied, as are the approaches students take to managing online coursework.

In our longitudinal research of six online courses delivered over a period of two years, we have collected five interviews with three faculty members and 34 interviews with 30 students about their perceptions and experiences of online teaching and learning. Our

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observations in working with students, as well as our analysis of interview data has shown that students do not always come well-equipped to deal with the expectations of self-directed learning within a community of engagement in online learning environments. Faculty members' accounts speak to the challenges entailed in learning to teach online, as well as their emotional responses. This script depicts some of the tensions inherent between student desire and instructor capacity, and focuses on the emotional responses of a novice online instructor as she deals with what is required of her to learn to teach effectively.

We have chosen to use a fictional comedic script to represent the issues faced by novice online teachers. Although in the form of a skit, rather than an ethnodrama (Saldaña, 2011), we have drawn on Saldaña's (2003) guidance to present the issues in the form of dream sequence recounted in a therapy session. The approach we have taken differs from a fully fledged ethnodrama, that relies on dramatizing "significant selections" of data (including interviews, fieldnotes, documents, journal entries and so forth) (Saldaña, 2011, p. 13), in that we have presented the issues in the form of a short fictitious skit involving invented characters. In exaggerating the characters of a struggling professor and inept therapist, we highlight the problems and challenges faced by inexperienced teachers dealing with problematic perceptions of what is entailed in online instruction.

Why comedy? Over the years, we have discovered that a high degree of flexibility and willingness to deal with the unexpected is required of us as teachers. We have found it useful to pre-empt anxiety through being well-prepared for teaching, reflective about what we do, and working collaboratively to share resources and insights with others. Rather than fuel feelings of anger and frustration through complaining, we believe that responding to situations and events that we find ludicrous through laughter is therapeutic (for example, not being able to enter an online meeting room in which all of our students were present!). In highlighting the absurdities we have encountered in learning to teach online, we invite the audience to not only laugh with us, but reflect on the profound changes taking place in the ways coursework in higher education is being delivered and the pedagogical skills that are fast becoming routinely expected of new faculty members.

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Writing and performing this script together has been in some ways cathartic, as it has enabled us to let go of some of the emotional responses we have experienced to teaching online – something we now feel comfortable with and enjoy. Further, online teaching has been pivotal in the ways we are now rethinking and re-envisioning our face-to-face

instructional practices (Kearns, 2016; Roblyer, Porter, Bielefeldt, & Donaldson, 2009). Thus the script should be read as indications of moments in the journey of learning to teach online, rather than as a critique of online instruction. We have performed an earlier version of this script at a local conference, and our audience members laughed. We hope you do too.

## Characters

**Dr. Innovator:** a naive teacher struggling to learn how to teach online to live up to the stellar reputation of University of Great New Things. She is NOT a digital native.

**Ms. Freudulant:** who fancies herself a therapist and interpreter of dreams. Her qualifications are a little questionable. In fact, as you will see, she is NOT a therapist.

**Scene:** *The scene takes place in the therapist's office with Ms. Freudulant seated. She is engrossed in a Candy Crush game on her iPad when she hears a knock on the door.*

**DI:** *(She knocks on the door – has to knock more than once because MF ignores first knocking. The second round of knocking is more insistent.)*

**MF:** *(Frowns, then grudgingly closes her iPad and moves slightly away on her desktop.)*  
Darn! Just when I was about to find all the bears!

Come in! How can I help you? Oh, my! What happened to you?

*(She looks Dr. Innovator up and down, and then shakes her head from side to side.)*  
You look terrible!

**DI:** *(speaking urgently and quickly)* Ms. Freudulant, I've heard you interpret dreams, and I've come for help. I probably need therapy too. I keep having this awful dream. Every night. Every night. I wake up in a cold sweat, and can't get back to sleep. I go to bed at 10 and wake up at 12 and then I can't get back to sleep. I haven't slept for months! I thought if you could interpret my dream it would help.

**MF:** *(She pats the chair as she looks longingly at her game.)* Of course! Come in, sit down. Relax. Relax. That's it. Take a deep breath. Sit back and relax. There. Now, tell me your dream. Let's hear it.  
*(She looks at her watch, then checks her phone, which she rests on the table beside her.)* Go on, now.

**DI:** (*speaking with an exasperated tone*) I've tried sleeping pills, going to the gym, reading a book, watching TV, writing a list, drinking milk before bed, petting my cat. I even bought a night mask to keep out all the light – you know, like they give you on airplanes. Nothing has helped. You're my last hope!

**MF:** (*rolls her eyes*) Settle down. Let's start at the beginning. How does the dream open?

**DI:** Well, I'm in my office at work, at my computer. It's the first day of classes and I'm prepping for the first session of my new online class that meets later in the day. When I try republishing a presentation I used last semester, something comes unstuck in the Learning Management System. I press publish, and NOTHING happens. I see a circle that goes round and round and round and round and round on the monitor. Nothing happens! I don't have time to deal with this and class time will be here before I know it. I have tried to get those tech people to do it – they're supposed to be so helpful, so says the university administration. Not so! I'm furious!

**MF:** (*She looks at her phone and watch again before turning her attention back to Dr. Innovator.*) Oh, my. Relax and breathe. Tell me what happens next in this dream of yours.

**DI:** I pick up the phone and once again call the university helpline.

**MF:** Go on, go on...  
(*Miss Freudulant's phone comes alive with a loud "Whoo Ha Ha" text message alert.*)  
Oops, excuse me, just another client.

**DI:** Suddenly, in the dream, people are streaming into my office. All shapes and sizes. They're all wearing yellow t-shirts with big green letters on them. They stand in a circle around my desk, holding hands, and say: "The part to the whole, the part to the whole, the part to the whole, the part to the whole." What on earth does that mean?

**MF:** OK, when we do dream interpretation, we need a little more detail. What were the letters on the t-shirts?

**DI:** There were so many and they were all different. IDO. OLO. TLC. ETLs. USNS, LMS...I think that's it. Oh! Wait, maybe there was CIA, NSA, and FBI too.

**MF:** (*she looks puzzled*) What on earth do you think all those letters mean? IDO. ETLs...

**DI:** Oh! That's just my university's name for Instructional Development Office, Online Learning Office, Teaching and Learning Center, Learning Management System,

ETLS...hmm, sorry, I'll have to look that one up, and University System of Nameless State. I can't imagine why the CIA, NSA, and FBI would turn up in my dream.

**MF:** Do you watch television late at night? Perhaps crime shows? We can come back to that later. Go on. What happened next?

**DI:** Well, all these people standing around in a circle holding hands suddenly start singing.

**MF:** Singing?

**DI:** Yes, they sing a round (*She begins to sing to the melody of Dona Nobis Pacem,<sup>1</sup> and ethereal voices from her dream join her in a three-part canon.*) "Have you re-started your computer?/Restart your computer, that might help./Restart your computer./Restart, restart, that might help."

**MF:** (*She looks at her phone again; and then makes an impatient noise.*) Hmmm... what then?

**DI:** Just as they finish singing, a bell on my phone rings. (*bell rings*) You know, one of those meeting reminders, and I know it's 15 minutes before my online meeting starts with my new students. The people stream out of my office as quickly as they streamed in.

**MF:** What do you do then?

**DI:** I restart the computer, and lo and behold, it works. I log into my online meeting room. Because I was 10 minutes early, and no one was there, I decided to look at my student information sheets. What surprised me was that every one of the students in the class lives in town – probably no more than a 15-minute drive from campus. I wondered what they were doing in an online class. Then I heard a knock at the door.

**MF:** Go on...

**DI:** I open the door to find a young woman standing there. She said: "Dr. Innovator, I'm Edna Technophobe, and I've come for office hours, may I come in?" I was taken aback, especially since I wasn't having office hours before classes even started. But, I make a point of always being nice to my students, so I say yes, and she sits down. "What can I do for you?" She commences to tell me about her background, her family, her dogs, her cats, her goldfish, and her career plans. She asks me to be on her dissertation committee. I don't even know this woman! She talks and talks and talks.

As she goes on and on, the more anxious I become about my online room on the computer. What if students are showing up? I won't be there for them. I'm always on time for my classes. I try to interrupt her to get to my class, but Edna continues to talk for an hour. When she finally winds down and I get back to my computer, no one is in the room. What a disaster! My students have come and gone.

**MF:** (*impatiently*) Couldn't you just tell the student to get out of your office? She sounds like a pain in the....never mind. What then?

**DI:** I tried. I really did, but she wouldn't go away. Then in my dream, I go to sleep in my chair, and when I wake up, I'm home, and it's the weekend.

**MF:** How are you feeling, in your dream?

**DI:** (*She breathes deeply and speaks with excitement.*) Oh, I feel great! It's the weekend. I feel like I want to go to sleep all day, but need to check on my students. I need to check my email to see if they have any questions or if they need my help with anything.

**MF:** And in your dream, do you check your email?

**DI:** I pick up my phone, and there are dozens of emails from students in my online class. "Where is the syllabus?" "What is the password for course reserves?" "I can't download the readings." "Where do I find this?" "Where do I find that?" "How do I do this?" "How do I do that?"

**MF:** Surely you don't answer all those emails. Tell me you don't.

**DI:** Oh, yes... I start answering email, but I'm so sleepy, so tired. In my dream, I go to sleep again. Funny, I'm dreaming about sleeping when I can't sleep.

**MF:** OK. I think I'm getting a sense of what happens in your dream so far... is there more?

**DI:** Yes. In my dream I wake up, and I'm in my office. It's dark outside. When I look out the window, my car is the only one in the parking lot. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the monitor on my computer blinking on and off. When I sit down to look, there's a flashing sign in large letters on the screen. "342 unread messages." My heart sinks. I've not checked the asynchronous message board in the LMS – that's Learning Management System – in three days, and I'm behind in keeping up with what my students are saying. I feel so guilty! It is going to take me hours to read what students

have posted. Then I have to grade these posts. After that, I have a whole set of papers I assigned that are due that same day. I'm so very tired. I decide to go home instead.

**MF:** And do you?

**DI:** To be honest, I'm not sure, because suddenly the dream fast-forwards to mid-semester, and I am downloading midpoint feedback.

**MF:** Hmmmmm.....Tell me more about that.

**DI:** The response rate is not great, but overall, students have positive things to say. And then as I'm reading, someone knocks at my office door. Before I can respond, in walks Edna Technophobe. She settles into a chair and says, "This class is really not working for me. I didn't fill out your stupid survey because it was online. I hate that Learning Management System. I wanted to see you in person, and I wanted to let you know that I would much rather take a face-to-face class because I learn more if we are in the same room."

**MF:** *(She yawns, then her phone rings again. She switches it off after several bars of the ring tone, which is the song "Here's a Quarter, Call Someone Who Cares.")*  
So, in your dream, what do you say?

**DI:** I ask her: "If you prefer taking classes face-to-face, why did you take an online class?" She says, "That's easy. It's more convenient and I don't want to commute. I live on over by the student center." And I say, "but that is just a three minute walk from here! Then Edna says, "Well, one of my friends told me I just HAD to take a class with Dr. Innovator."

**MF:** *(yawning again)* Dr. Innovator, I think our time is up. Perhaps you could come back next week for another session. *(Checks her phone for new messages again.)*

**DI:** *(angry)* I'm not sure I WANT another session. I just want to know what the dream means so I can get some sleep.

**MF:** It's quite clear what's going on here. You have TOAD.

**DI:** TOAD? What's that?

**MF:** T. O. A. D. Teaching Online Anxiety Disorder. It happens to everyone, even experienced online professors. Let's take a look at your dream. First, you had the



image of the “wheel of death.” That circle that goes round and round and round and round. That’s a symbol that you’re anxious the technology is not going to work for you. Upgrade your equipment if it doesn’t work. Or just restart your computer. Second, you described the hermeneutic circle of support – all those people with the unusual combinations of letters on their T-shirts, holding hands and singing. Here again, you’re exhibiting anxiety that you agreed to teach a fully online course, but you’re afraid you won’t get the support you need. Very common. I have professors in here all the time with dreams like that one. I hear your University of Great New Things has Learning Communities for faculty. Perhaps you could suggest a support group for professors with TOAD.

**DI:** *(nodding in agreement)*

**MF:** Third, you described Edna Technophobe: the student who longs to see you face-to-face, but finds it more convenient to stay home. There’s obviously some conflict going on there. *(She hands DI a business card.)* Maybe you could give her my number. Fourth, you talked about feeling like you are on call 24/7 and checking your email all the time. You know you cannot keep that up, right? And why are you answering questions for which the answers are already on the syllabus, anyway? They ARE on the syllabus, aren’t they?

**DI:** *(She looks shocked, like she’s forgotten, and shakes head no.)*

**MF:** Oh, and you really need to stop watching crime shows before bedtime. It’s no wonder the NSA, FBI, and CIA show up in your dreams. Just turn off the television. That way you’ll have more time to interact with your students. And maybe you’ll be able to sleep. *(She checks her watch.)* That’s it. Our time is up.

**DI:** *(frustrated)* But, but, but, I need to spend more time with my students, really?

**MF:** Yes, more time with the students. You do want to be responsive to your students, don’t you? Good day. *(Dr. Innovator leaves and Miss Freudulant grabs her iPad and returns to her Candy Crush game, smiling.)*

## Afterword

We value good teaching, and take an approach to teaching that is responsive, reflexive, recursive, reflective, and contextual (Preissle & deMarrais, 2011, 2015) – irrespective of whether instruction is delivered online or face-to-face. We have found that the development of online coursework and management of asynchronous interaction with

students in course delivery place significant demands on faculty time (Spector, 2005). Further, research on online teaching indicates that teachers take on multiple roles that encompass those of instructional designer and facilitator in addition to carrying out managerial, technical, and pedagogical tasks (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011). These authors comment that teachers moving from traditional to online classrooms face “constant challenges of finding their teacher-self” (p. 435), and recommend critical reflection as an essential part of the transformational process.

In this script, by presenting the voice of Dr. Innovator, we hope to invite critical reflections on both what it means to be a novice teacher in an online context, and what is needed for novice online teachers to develop and mature as teachers in ways that assist students to learn, and from which teachers derive pleasure. Bennett (2014) found that the integration of new tools in teaching and learning poses significant challenges to instructors both emotionally and practically. Effective development of the varied competencies required of online teachers relies on strong institutional (e.g., Hinson & LaPrairie, 2005) and social support (e.g., Green et al., 2013) for developing the pedagogical skills required for teaching in online environments (González, 2012).

## Implications

In relation to the script presented, we invite readers to reflect on three issues that relate to learning to teach online:

- (1) the support structures needed for faculty to develop expertise to,
- (2) design and deliver courses that support effective student learning in a,
- (3) community of inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, 2001; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008) that facilitates social presence among students.

First, as more universities transition to delivering coursework in hybrid and online formats, support structures — technical, social, and pedagogical — are needed for faculty transitioning into online teaching assignments. Assembling these support structures is no easy task, and involves support at the programmatic, departmental and institutional levels. The technical demands of learning about new technologies (Learning Management Systems, tools for developing screencasts and course materials and facilitating synchronous meetings, and more recently, using mobile applications), require extensive professional development on the part of faculty members, especially for those who have themselves had little access to online instruction as students. Further, this professional development needs to be delivered “just-in-time,” especially for faculty like us, who work in institutions in which research productivity is a requirement.

Second, we have frequently heard the adage that students younger than we are “digital natives” who will naturally gravitate to online environments. We have found that this is not necessarily true. Findings from analysis of interviews with our students indicate that courses must be well-designed and clearly structured and organized. Students appreciate guidance as to how to manage coursework, for example, in the form of clear rubrics for grading, and critical feedback from instructors and peers. These structures and support mechanisms are especially helpful for students who are newcomers to online learning contexts.

Third, and finally, we have found that students in online learning contexts express the desire to be “known” by others in authentic ways. For some students, being known involves an embodied presence — which shows up when students knock on our doors. As we have gained more experience in online teaching, we have learned that an empathetic and supportive community of inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; 2001; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008) can be developed through strong teacher presence and active engagement in activities that cognitively challenge students to apply the content covered in coursework. We also recognize that new technologies such as synchronous online conferencing tools may be employed to provide physical presence among students and instructors.

As we develop as online teachers, we have worked to develop the support structures at the programmatic level that will facilitate teachers’ entrées into online teaching. We have identified the kinds of course designs, organizational structures, and pedagogical strategies that will assist faculty and students to manage their work effectively. What we have learned, though, is that as our student population changes and new technologies are developed, both questions and answers evolve. The work of learning how to teach and learning how to learn is ongoing. Humor, we believe, will help teachers and their students as they navigate their journeys.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>*Dona Nobis Pacem*, is Latin for "Grant us peace," and is both the title and lyrics of a traditional canon that is a frequent inclusion in classical choral repertoire.