The Courage to Teach Well Online

Deana M. Raffo
Department of Management, Middle Tennessee State University

Thomas M. Brinthaupt
Department of Psychology, Middle Tennessee State University

Lawanna S. Fisher
Department of University Studies, Middle Tennessee State University

Justin G. Gardner,
School of Agriculture, Middle Tennessee State University

Abstract
This paper explores the principles at the heart of Parker Palmer's seminal book on teaching with purpose and passion, *The Courage to Teach,* within the online environment. It reports the results of four faculty members from diverse disciplines who teach online and who have discussed, debated, and explored Palmer's ideas in the context of online teaching. The paper argues that, as with traditional, face-to-face teaching, effective online teaching must address many of the same kinds of paradoxes originally described by Palmer. In particular, it focuses on ways in which identity and wholeness, fear and separation, and community present challenges that require courage in order to teach well online.

Introduction

We recently passed the twentieth anniversary mark of Parker Palmer's seminal book on teaching with purpose and passion, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (1998). In 2007, a tenth anniversary edition was printed; in 2017 a twentieth anniversary edition was printed. However, only a small percentage of these citations pertain to online teaching and learning. In this paper, we explore the principles at the heart of *The Courage to Teach* within the online environment.

Palmer provides a way of viewing teaching that is not a roadmap, nor a framework, but a frame of mind where bringing our whole selves—our strengths, our perspective in our discipline, our personal challenges, and our vulnerabilities—to our teaching. Teaching with courage is about knowing who we are, not just as a teacher, but as a person and being willing to bring ourselves fully to our profession. Palmer emphasizes the individuality of all teachers and, as such, assumes that teaching is different for everyone—and should be.

According to Palmer, students should view teachers as individuals who bring expertise and an informed perspective to the classroom. Through teacher-student interactions centered around the subject, learning occurs. Teachers are at their best when they bring courage—including recognizing and acknowledging their emotions, vulnerabilities, and fears—to the classroom so that students can see and know teachers for who they are.

Recently researchers have been studying the role of emotions in online teaching. This research includes examining the role of emotions in communication in online teaching (Brooks & Young, 2015) and in teacher presence and engagement strategies (Moore & Black, 2018). In a study of nearly 1,000 online teachers, Badia et al. (2019) reviewed a variety of positive and negative emotions involved with teaching online and the factors that influence those emotions. They found that satisfaction, relief, and pleasure were important features of online teaching. In their faculty development efforts, Niebuhr et al. (2018) explored "technology courage," which they defined as the "willingness to try and to persist when using a new technology because of perceived benefit to self and/or others" (Discussion section, para. 6). This recent interest in the emotions of online teaching fits in well with the emphasis of Palmer's book.

At the time of the writing of this paper, citations of Palmer's book are over 7,700 and its we can see its impact on a range of education topics that span primary, secondary, and higher education. His work has had significant effects on course design (e.g. Fink, 2013; Ouellett, 2004), teacher education (e.g. Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Korthagen, 2004), adult learning (e.g. Daloz, 2012; Jarvis, 2004), and curriculum and pedagogy (e.g. Miller, 2007; Howard, 2003), among others.

Palmer's premise is that good, or courageous, teaching involves an inner journey toward vocational purpose and passion. This journey engages both the teacher and the student through connections with each other and with the subject. He argues that courageous teaching is a discovery process that involves recognizing and revealing one's true self or identity, striving for integrity and wholeness, overcoming barriers or obstacles that lead to fear, and learning within a community.

As online teaching and learning has become more prevalent, best practice recommendations have proliferated (e.g., Keengwe & Kidd, 2010; Price et al., 2016). Brinthaupt et al. (2011) proposed that online teachers should strive for fostering student engagement, stimulating intellectual development, and building rapport with students. However, Palmer (2007) argues that good teaching is not about methodology or technique. "Technique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives" (p. 6). Rather than learning practical techniques or methods, Palmer proposes that the core of good teaching involves gaining personal insights into one's identity and then bringing those insights to the community of learners to engage in the subject. This argument should be true regardless of delivery mode.

This paper reports the results of four faculty members from diverse disciplines who teach online and who have discussed, debated, and explored Palmer's ideas in the context of online teaching. A series of questions guided our discussions: Do Palmer's ideas for traditional, face-to-face (F2F) classes resonate in the online learning environment? Can online teaching allow us to be (and express) our true selves, or does the impersonal nature of distance learning inhibit this key

principle? Are the fears and vulnerabilities (and associated obstacles and barriers) we face in online teaching the same or different from F2F teaching? Is it possible to foster a sense of community among a group of people whose only connection is an online class? Finally, in what ways does it take courage to teach online? We argue that, as with traditional, F2F teaching, effective online teaching must address many of the same kinds of paradoxes originally described by Palmer. We discuss three major areas identified by Palmer for courageous teaching: identity and wholeness, fear and separation, and community.

Identity and Wholeness

In his book, Palmer (2007) notes that a clear identity is a crucial feature of the courageous teacher. As he puts it, "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique: good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 154). By identity, Palmer means the inner landscape of the teacher or the self that teaches. This highly subjective and phenomenological approach stretches beyond the techniques one uses and aligns those techniques with one's identity. Throughout his book, Palmer makes the case that good teachers infuse a strong sense of personal identity into their work.

The features of teacher identity include both self-perceptions and the perceptions of others (e.g., Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Hong et al., 2017). That is, identity includes the ways that people understand and evaluate themselves as well as how other people understand and evaluate oneself. As educational reviewers have noted, learning to teach involves a process of integrating one's personal narrative and life story into multiple possible identities as a teacher (e.g., Carter & Doyle, 1996; Gee, 2000; Rodgers & Scott, 2008). Emphasizing the importance of self-knowledge to teaching, Palmer (2007) states that "we teach who we are" (p. 1) and that "teaching is a daily exercise in vulnerability" (p. 17). In the online teaching domain, teachers should therefore manage their self-presentations in ways that reflect their self-perceptions in an accurate manner to their students. On the surface, this process seems easier said than done.

Can online teaching "engage the soul" in the ways Palmer describes? On the surface, one might be concerned with the fundamental "soulless" nature of online teaching. For example, how can the teacher be "present" without actually being physically present? According to Palmer, connecting with students depends on knowing one's self as both a teacher and as an individual— and making it available to one's students. Teaching as a vocation provokes deep gladness. It is debatable whether these are obtainable experiences when teaching an online course.

Researchers have developed a variety of adaptive learning environments (Najjar, 2008), intelligent learning systems (Abell, 2006), and intelligent tutors/agents (Aleven et al., 2009; Hall & Williams, 2012). These systems permit automated individualized tutoring and scaffolding for a variety of online learning tasks. With increasing interest in these kinds of adaptive learning programs, it is possible to monitor and direct a student's progress through an online (as well as an F2F) course without the participation of a live human. These efforts seem antithetical to or incongruous with the courageous teacher described by Palmer. In particular, with increasing automaticity might come increased distance from the teaching context for teachers. Whereas we can automate course content, teachers need to inject consciously and deliberately their own personality and presence into the material. Similarly, we must be careful when automating a teacher's identity or presence. Teachers can infuse their personality and presence by creating introductory or explanatory videos or biographical sketches in an introductory discussion forum.

In the online domain, we need to make a conscious effort to personalize ourselves as a teacher. Best practices for online teaching (e.g., Brinthaupt et al., 2011) include being transparent about oneself as a teacher. For example, online teachers are encouraged to make sure that their students see them as present and engaged in the course (i.e., that a "real person" is teaching the course), so students will be less hesitant about contacting them or asking questions. From a logical perspective, a teacher's personality or identity can be inserted anywhere in an online class. Just as with F2F courses, online teachers can be strategic about revealing or indicating their "personality" within the confines of the online course. In some ways, the online environment permits a more controlled presentation of a teacher's identity than in the F2F environment. One reason for this greater control is the ability of online course designers or teachers to modulate the teacher-identity features of course content, assessments, and activities.

Bringing one's identity to the online environment means bringing one's whole self, which Palmer says involves three paths in the inner teaching landscape—intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. As Palmer (2007) puts it, "When a person is healthy and whole, the head and the heart are both-and, not either-or, and teaching that honors that paradox can help makes us all more whole" (p. 66). In other words, teachers need to combine both the intellectual and emotional in their lives as well as in their teaching.

In summary, online teachers need the courage to be themselves (i.e., effectively convey their personal and teacher identity in a comprehensive and authentic manner) for several reasons. They need to determine how to translate effectively their identity into the online "classroom" by overcoming a variety of technical, social, and psychological barriers. They need to be willing and able to share themselves as a teacher with a community of learners that is not physically present. In addition, they need to motivate themselves to connect content with learners in a setting that is potentially less structured and less threatening than interacting with one's students in person. In essence, the courage needed to bring one's identity to online teaching requires that teachers resist the urge to hide themselves behind or within the delivery mode.

Fear and Separation

Palmer suggests that separation from our students can make it difficult to be an effective teacher. Even in F2F classes, where students and teachers share the same general proximity, there are barriers that separate the two. Several of these barriers are external, and we have little or no control over these divisions. For example, students generally consider teachers the authority figure in a classroom. They set the tone for how the class will function: lecture, discussion, collaboration, etc. This sets them apart from students in the classroom, who we expect to follow the direction for the class established by the teacher. There is also an assumed difference in the knowledge of the subject matter between the teacher and the students. The fact that teachers must assign grades for students causes another level of separation.

Several questions come to mind when we examine these barriers in the online teaching environment. Similar to the F2F classroom, we find that some of the separations and fears remain consistent in the online classroom. Teachers are still in a position of authority even in the online classroom. They still establish the layout of the class: videos, homework, discussions, assignments, etc. We assume that in most cases the teacher has a better command of the content than the students do. In addition, the teacher is still in the position of assigning grades. Therefore, these barriers are very similar regardless of delivery mode.

Palmer also points out other, less tangible, barriers that may exist in the traditional classroom. These barriers are internal and may not be obvious to the casual observer. One such barrier, that the actions of both the teacher and the student can manifest, is fear. Vulnerability and competition may contribute to this fear. Teachers in a traditional classroom who feel vulnerable may prefer to stand behind a podium to lecture. They may use previously prepared lecture notes, presentations, or handouts and be reluctant to veer from these. Teachers may fear that students will become lost in the lecture or will not participate in discussions or activities.

Examining vulnerability and competition in the online classroom, we find that they still exist but may take on different manifestations. While F2F teachers who feel vulnerable may choose to stand (or hide) behind a podium, online teachers may replace the podium with a computer screen. This may put even more separation between the student and the teacher, since there may be no live interaction between the two. Because preparing online materials may take longer if videos and websites are used, some online teachers may be more resistant to updating materials than they would be in an F2F class. Another factor that contributes to anxiety in the online environment is teachers might fear that, in the future, technology could replace them in the classroom (e.g., Li, 2007; Qing & Akins, 2005).

The online environment can exacerbate the fears of diversity, conflict, and losing identity when teachers find it challenging to express controversial or difficult concepts in ways that are clearly understood. Li and Irby (2008) suggest that online faculty, whether full-time or adjunct, should have experience teaching the course in both the online and F2F formats to ensure continuity between the courses. This experience increases the chances that students will have comparable experiences in their online and traditional courses. Sugar et al. (2004) also recommended that teachers should incorporate technologies that they believe enhance their students' learning, without the influence of others. This allows them to present material in the format that they are most comfortable with and be as authentic as they can be. In other words, teachers should be able to use technologies that they are familiar and satisfied with using when teaching online—not ones that others have chosen.

In summary, online teachers need "fear and separation courage" for several reasons. They need to be able to overcome the obvious tangible barriers related to proximity and delivery. More importantly, they need to face internal barriers, or vulnerabilities, that elicit fears. Teaching online requires a willingness to permanently capture one's teaching, including mistakes, missteps, or rookie blunders. It requires a willingness to feel exposed, due to a seeming lack of feedback or to the difficulties that can arise in navigating difficult or controversial material in an online environment. Overall, the courage needed to face these vulnerabilities requires that teachers face the separations and fears that can make us want to separate from rather than embrace the challenges of online teaching.

Community

One of Palmer's key concepts is the notion of community. He places a strong emphasis on the value of community, and he claims that distance does not fit well into his personal model of teaching and learning. One community challenge with online teaching is that of bridging community and distance. By nature, online teaching is done at a distance, yet building a community of learners by developing personal connection and building rapport is important for student learning (Brinthaupt et al., 2011). However, online students may feel isolated or that they have a lack of support (Power & Morven-Gould, 2011).

Online teachers may use the "right" or recommended techniques to connect with students through creative introductory assignments, discussion board protocols designed to heighten engagement, and intricate models for team collaboration. However, teachers need to be able to foster the intimate community of learners that Palmer speaks about when he refers to the "connectedness at the heart of authentic education" (p. 92). Failure to achieve this goal can lead to a fragmented relationship between online teachers and their students.

Throughout his book, Palmer argues that the student's primary learning should come from engagement with the subject rather than with one's teacher or classmates. On the surface, it seems easier with online courses for this kind of engagement to occur, since there may be less opportunity or requirement to engage with one's teacher or classmates. This argument assumes that we design an online course in a way that effectively facilitates student engagement with the subject, which is a frequent focus of online best practices.

Students connect with each other in the online course, yet these connections may not happen simultaneously, and interactions and participation are typically asynchronous. Students can certainly be unengaged in F2F classes both with the course content (e.g., sleeping, daydreaming, or nonattendance) and by not interacting with the teacher or classmates. In those F2F cases, teachers can at least be in a position to identify their students' levels of understanding and engagement. However, in the online context, identifying how well students are engaging with the subject can be difficult and challenging (Dixson, 2010).

In summary, there are several ways that online teachers can develop "community courage." They need to foster connectedness by bridging distance through personal connections and building rapport. Best practices techniques and tools can accomplish this goal. The more difficult challenge is to build a community of truth that connects students to the subject on a deep and meaningful level and shifting the responsibility for creating community away from the teacher and to the students.

Discussion

Through our study of Palmer's work, we found ourselves having more questions related to courage and online teaching, especially as it related to identity, that did not fit within the parameters of this paper, but that should be more fully explored as future research. There are issues related to identity that present their own vulnerabilities. For example, what is the degree of ownership of a course and how much should an identity be engrained into the design? An issue we have not addressed in this paper is that some institutions use a process whereby faculty develop an online course that other faculty teach. An online course developer is not necessarily the person who teaches the course. In this case, even if the developer tried to introduce differing views and difficult topics, the teachers may find that their own views differ from those of the developers. Teachers in this position may find that they feel hypocritical—acting like someone they are not—because the course might include highly idiosyncratic and individualistic elements that reflect the developer's identity. In this situation, it can be a challenge to personalize an existing course so that it reflects the identity of the one teaching it. Some institutions prohibit major changes to an approved online course; these rules can sometimes prevent a teacher from individualizing the course, which complicates the elements of teaching courageously. Future research could examine both student and faculty perceptions of an online course that someone teaches who did not develop it.

Another area related to identity involves whether there may be individual differences in teachers' personality or identity that make them more (or less) amenable to teaching online. For

example, teachers with higher levels of social or performance anxiety might experience greater success teaching online than F2F. We know very little about the kinds of personality characteristics that might relate to courage or vulnerability in an online teaching environment. This question would an interesting topic for future research.

Another interesting question with respect to online teaching identity is whether the perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of purely online teachers differ from those of purely F2F teachers. It is conceivable that mode of delivery can affect or be related to different identity features. For example, because online teaching typically involves less direct, live contact with one's students, we may alter concerns about self-presentation and impression management compared to F2F teaching.

A final interesting question regarding teacher identity pertains to how institutions can sustain and deepen the self-awareness and self-perceptions from which good online teaching comes. For example, if there are structures, policies, and systems that can promote this process, should we use those whenever possible? Gee (2000) proposes four different perspectives for a teacher's identity: nature, institutional, discourse, and affinity. Future research might explore the relative importance of these perspectives for online teaching as well as how they might work together to create the identity of an online teacher.

There are also research questions related to separation and fear in the online environment. For example, how do faculty express vulnerability when teaching online? With F2F teaching, we can demonstrate our vulnerabilities through sharing mistakes, stories of experiences, or saying "I don't know." When teachers expose their liabilities in an effort to humanize the content, it is often through spontaneous interactions that reveal an authenticity in connecting with the subject or the students. While we can express these vulnerabilities online through static content in videos, discussions, or feedback, is it as effective in the online class?

In our discussions, we often ascribed teachers' fears in creating online courses to the suspicion that there is a hesitancy to record oneself (audio or video) for online delivery. If this is the case, what accounts for these fears? Is it the permanency of the online course content? Do teachers not want to see or hear oneself? Alternatively, can we attribute this tentativeness to an increased self-focused attention that is less likely in F2F courses? While we could not find any research that addresses these questions, Legon (Quality Matters) discusses the "tangible reality" of a digital record in online courses that can be analyzed, studied, and shared (in Simunich, 2015).

There are also several research questions about creating and maintaining a sense of community when teaching online with courage. For example, it would be interesting to examine how online teachers struggle with and succeed at building a thriving online community. Although research has examined how teachers can develop a successful online community of learners (e.g., Charalambos et al., 2004; Ouyang & Scharber, 2017), we could find very little research examining the personal challenges that online teachers experience as they manage the community features of their courses.

An additional research question is whether teachers who prefer to downplay or not develop a community of learners in their teaching are more attracted to online than face-to-face teaching. For example, some of the layers of "protection" we described earlier in this paper might appeal to teachers who find F2F teaching a struggle or threat. Alternatively, are there certain features of creating an online community that turn courageous F2F teachers away from teaching online?

Conclusion

Following Palmer, we assume that courageous online teaching is likely to be associated with more effective teaching than non-courageous online teaching. It seems entirely possible to teach online well (and effectively) by simply following best practice recommendations, with little to no attention to the "courage" points made by Palmer and us. This is an empirical question. If there is a way to quantify online teaching that is courageous, then we could determine if teachers who possess those characteristics generate more effective student learning and more positive student evaluations than teachers who lack those characteristics.

Does it take courage to teach well online? Courage may not be a term that we think of very often when we think of online teaching. Yet when we examine the issues of identity, emotions, vulnerabilities, fears, and challenges, we find that many of Palmer's thoughts on courage and teaching are present, or even more salient, in the online environment. He closes *The Courage to Teach* by challenging us to teach through our heartfelt identity, values, and mission. We believe that this challenge is equally relevant to online teaching. To paraphrase Palmer, online technique is what teachers use until the real online teacher arrives.

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Corresponding Author

Deana M. Raffo, Department of Management, Middle Tennessee State University, Box 75, Murfreesboro, TN 37132. Email: deana.raffo@mtsu.edu