

Structure, authority and other noncepts¹: teaching in fool-ish spaces

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Introduction

As the rules of social engagement and hierarchy become less clearly defined in online spaces (Dubrovsky et al 1991, Joinson 2002), so authority becomes an increasingly tricky notion in online teaching. In addition, unstructured digital spaces (wikis, live chat, virtual worlds) have great potential as sites of learning, connection and construction of meaning and self (Turkle, 1995), but the teacher's capacity to control or regulate these spaces is limited (Land and Bayne, 2006). Indeed, we argue the tutor's role in such a space is not to regulate, but rather to *participate* and *provoke* in creative and playful ways that open up passages or possibilities in chaotic online spaces.

In choosing to talk about the role of the tutor, what it is that a learner needs of his or her senior colleague in an educational engagement, and what might be changed about the relationship between the tutor and the learner in the online learning environment, we come to our first noncept: the definition of tutoring itself.

It is reassuring to find that, at time of writing, the entry "tutor" in Wikipedia is a hotbed of controversy. The main article carries the warning that "This article appears to contradict itself" and the reader is directed away to the discussion about the topic on the "talk" page. Superficially, the discussion seems to be about the differences in the way in which the word is used in the UK as compared with the rest of the world. On closer inspection however, the distinction being discussed is between the use of tutor as an academic rank and as academic role; between who tutors are, and what tutors do. The plot thickens considerably when we consider the term "tuition". For some, tuition is what you receive when you engage in an educational exchange with another person. For others, tuition is what you pay, for... well, it is not clear what precisely. All the good words seem to be used up.

The Wikipedia definition of online tutoring, on the other hand, is rather distressingly uncontroversial:

Online tutoring refers to the process by which knowledge is imparted from a tutor or knowledge provider or expert to a student or knowledge recipient over the Internet.³

¹ The story goes that the title of the book by Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore "The Medium is the Message" was actually a misprint which the authors allowed to stand because they felt that the event (the misprint) contributed to the point they were trying to make, and because they enjoyed its value as a pun. Our "noncepts" word derived from a typo in an email exchange between us while discussing the paper, and has stuck as a way of expressing those ideas that we were trying to grapple with for which no appropriate words or metaphors existed. Judging by the relative proximity of the "c" and "n" keys on the QWERTY keyboard, this was more likely to have been a Freudian Slip than a typographical error, the word striving to combine the spirit of "concepts" and "nonsense".

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It does have the virtue of being clear. But it is hopelessly authoritarian and instructionist in conception, putting the sage firmly centre stage. The rhetoric is all transmission and content, without the slightest nod to a constructivist epistemology. Something has to be going on in a tutorial, but if it is simply knowledge transmission then a good textbook would probably serve us better. The notion of tutorless tutorials espoused by problem-based learning enthusiasts helps focus attention here. Something happens in such tutorials that is not dependent on the presence of an authority figure: the tutorial consists of conversations that contribute to building understanding.

So what is it that tutors do, or should do, in support of the online learner? Some have sought to explore and clarify by the adoption of particular metaphors, such as moderator, mentor, or facilitator, to describe the tutor's role. These terms have their value in guiding our behaviour as online tutors, but their force is primarily to warn us to stand aside. The evidence is that too much, or inappropriate, contribution to tutorial discussion by the tutor can inhibit contributions by the students (Mazzolini and Maddison, 2003). The rhetoric of facilitator and moderator speaks of a duty to liberate the students, and empower them to participate in their own learning. This has the ring of critical pedagogy about it, which would seek to remove the authority of the teacher, casting teacher and learner as equal participants in the educational endeavour. Such protestations of equality will ultimately show themselves to have been disingenuous, however, when the imperative of assessment rears its ugly head. Worse, though, is the fact that these formulations guide us about what we shouldn't do, but remain rather silent about what we should be doing.

If the online tutor is going to move from centre stage (King 1993) and sacrifice some ideas of his or her sagacity, what sorts of roles might be taken up to contribute to the guidance of the online learner? There are paradoxes here. We know that distance education (and, by implication, online engagement) is associated with particularly high discontinuation rates (Simpson, 2003; Tinto, 1993) and so it would seem that the online learner will need more, rather than less, perceived support from the teacher. Yet the online teacher has no physical presence to which the online learner can turn, and the nature of time-shifted asynchronous communication that supports much online learning will mean that significant delays must be tolerated between exchanges. In deliberately standing aside to allow the learner more personal autonomy, the online teacher must nevertheless make their virtual presence felt strongly (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Steps must be taken to counter the remoteness and mediated nature of the relationship.

In this paper we explore the notion of the presence of the online educator as being that of the jester, trickster or fool. To start with, here are some general thoughts about each of these archetypal characters.

Jester

*They have ridden like froth down the whirlpools of time,
They have jingled their caps in the councils of state,
They have snared half the wisdom of life in a rhyme,
And tripped into nothingness grinning at fate.*

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_tutoring

(Don Marquis, from "The Jester", 1915.
<http://www.thenoodlebowl.com/jesters/pages/jesters.html>)

And while the king was looking down, the jester stole his thorny crown...
(Don McLean, "American Pie")

Who shall bring redemption, but the jesters?
(the Talmud)

Court jesters have been figures in European history and literature since ancient Roman times. Jesters in other traditions – Chinese, Middle-Eastern, Indian – have similarly long lineages (Otto, 2001). Though their characteristics and roles are not identical across these traditions, there are some common qualities: irreverence, wit, and a complex and shifting relationship with power. Jesters are irritants in the society around – like the proverbial grain of sand in an oyster. The responsibility of these characters is to poke fun at the established authority, and to ask questions about what would seem to be the obvious, natural order of things.

Trickster

"Tricksters challenge the status quo and disrupt perceived boundaries. Whether foolishly, arrogantly, or bravely, tricksters face the monstrous, transforming the chaotic to create new worlds and new cultures."
(Smith 1997, 2)

Coyote, Raven, Loki, and Anansi are some names the trickster is known by. Tricksters emerge from their many cultural contexts as some combination of magical, powerful, arrogant, challenging, irresponsible, malicious, difficult-to-pin-down, shape-shifting, selfish, frightening and unpredictable. The trickster is a maker of mischief and a creator of tension, occasionally with actively malicious intent, but more often than not s/he (and indeed, ambiguity of sex, sexuality and gender is often a feature of the trickster's persona) is also responsible for the resolution of the tension by fun and foolery (Radin 1956).

Fool

"Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men."
(1 Corinthians 1:25)

In considering the Fool as a metaphor, there are many stories and ideas to choose from. From sacred or mystical fools, to the "feast of fools", to the Zen "beginner's mind" and Shakespearean and other literary fools, fools are characters who provoke new wisdom in others, rather than owning conventional wisdom in their own right. They are tolerated rather than loved by the objects of their attention, and yet their importance is tacitly acknowledged through assumptions of divine protection, commission, or even essence. The irritation that the fool engenders is frequently the source of insights on the part of others; protagonists frequently emerge as sadder, but wiser, following a fool's ministrations.

The fool's mastery is of context (Welsford 1935, 5), not content. The trickster stands at thresholds and deals in liminality, and delights in the role of outsider, stranger, other. The jester is both grounded and exposed, and is therefore a lightning-rod for aggression. S/he both challenges and upholds authority, while the trickster is more consistently subversive. As we will see, there is a place for all of these roles in online teaching. They are not easy to sustain – they are uncomfortable and, perhaps, quite lonely. By embracing discomfort and loneliness the teacher-fool can therefore also perhaps gain insight into their students' sense of being lost in online spaces.

By exploring themes and ideas relating to these archetypal characters, we invite teachers to embrace some of the challenges, contradictions and fun of teaching and learning online. What follows is divided into three sections, which reflect the insights and strategies we think the metaphors of fool, jester and trickster offer to online teaching:

- authority, attention and risk;
- innocence, danger and fun;
- complexity, liminality and absurdity.

Authority, attention and risk

First: a story about Anansi⁴, a trickster with West African origins, who is also often found in Caribbean folklore. He is both very clever and very greedy, and once went through many trials in order to be named the "King of All Stories"⁵. In this tale, he makes it his business to gather up and hoard all the world's wisdom (or common sense) in a calabash. He succeeds eventually, and is looking for a place to hide the wisdom. He decides to hide it at the top of a tall tree, so he straps the calabash to his chest and begins to climb. However, the calabash keeps getting in his way, and Anansi becomes frustrated. A small child observes what Anansi is doing, and calls up to him to put the calabash on his back, instead. Anansi is furious that after all the work he has done, even a small child has wisdom that he doesn't possess. He smashes the calabash, and the wisdom scatters everywhere, so that everyone has some, but no one has it all.

Anansi wanted to control access to stories, and to define everyone's relationship with knowledge, and this is one way of looking at the traditional "sage on the stage" approach to teaching. Online, though, it is impossible to make authority/truth claims as if in a vacuum; the online space is one where the presence of other knowledge, and the willingness and ability of students to locate and articulate this, is never very far from the surface. And, in a medium that is itself evolving quickly, the tutor is not always going to be able to look like the source of all wisdom. What, then, is the online tutor's role?

A willingness to be the focus of critical attention – and, at times, a lightning-rod for aggression – is part of the function of the jester-teacher. It is possible that in online spaces any type of attention the tutor can attract is better than none at all. The volume of readily available information 'out there', where the tutor and the learner must meet, means that the ability to grab and hold a learner's attention is challenged: "...in an information economy, the real scarce commodity will always be human attention" (Lanham 2006, online). To be impossible to ignore must, at times, be the tutor's primary goal in entering the noisy silence of the online learner's experience in chaotic spaces. As Roszak (1994) has it, "An excess of information may actually

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anansi>

⁵ http://mythsandtales.com/_wsn/page17.html

crowd out ideas, leaving the mind (young minds especially) distracted by sterile, disconnected facts, lost among shapeless heaps of data". In *Second Life*, being impossible to ignore may involve donning fins and a wetsuit or a bright red mohawk and, quite literally (well, quite virtually), clowning. In textual spaces like wikis, it may mean being flagrantly provocative, in playing 'devil's advocate'⁶, and in demanding active debate and disagreement from students.

Self-mockery or encouragement of critical attention from students can be challenging for tutors, though. Jestings demands exposure, while traditional models of 'sage on the stage' teaching serve to protect and distance the teacher from personal vulnerability, and, as such, provide little to prepare the online teacher for the lengths to which he or she may wish to go in inviting challenge and attracting attention.

Part of the jester's role has traditionally also been to mock and expose the folly of powerful people and ideas (Peterson 2003, online). However, the jester-teacher who encourages his or her students to question authority and speak truth to power must be prepared for the possibility that he or she will be the first casualty of any student brave enough to take such encouragement seriously. The flattening effect of online spaces, where students are already less likely to perceive the tutor as the source of all authority or respect the boundaries of a traditional, hierarchical student/teacher relationship (Dubrovsky et al 1991), enhances the likelihood that the jesting gaze will be turned on the tutor. The fear of exposure and loss of authority that could accompany such strategies may be heightened by the teacher's own subject positions in terms of gender, age and ethnicity, for example. Some tutors may feel they cannot afford to allow their hard-won authority to be challenged.

For others, it may be important for them to ask themselves what masking function playing the jester/fool might perform, in light of their unquestionable authority to assess: "we should not forget that the metaphor of the Jester also implies the use of indirect and subtle ways to achieve desired results. There is a clear idea on the part of the Jester of which results are important to achieve..." (Ashworth 2004, p 80). Court jesters in history have often been 'learned men' in disguise (Welsford 1968, 23), and we do well to be reminded of the layers of identities the tutor as jester assumes. Ellsworth, who has problematised critical pedagogy as being insufficiently attentive to the tutor's own position(s) of privilege, describes a shift from "dialogue" to "working together across differences" (Ellsworth, 1989). Such a shift acknowledges social positions and involves everyone – teachers and students – in attending to the circulation of power in their online classrooms.

Innocence, danger and fun

In a story about Mulla Nasrudin (sometimes Nasreddin), a mystic Turkish jester/fool:

Nasrudin sat on a river bank when someone shouted to him from the opposite side:

- 'Hey! how do I get across?'

⁶ Playing devil's advocate is in itself a challenging notion for many learners, who may, especially in their early years of higher education, be conditioned by what Stewart and Cohen call "lies to children" (Pratchett, Stewart and Cohen, 1999) to expect simple and unambiguous questions and equally simple answers.

- 'You are across!' Nasrudin shouted back.⁷

Nasrudin's response hints at several possibilities for the online learner: that the place one is may be perfectly adequate; that there is not necessarily a need to rush off somewhere else. This may be particularly the case at times when ignorance is felt most keenly. Moments of not-knowing can be extremely uncomfortable, and extremely productive. The fool embodies secure not-knowing in a way which can serve as a model for teachers and students. Secure not-knowing might also be termed "beginner's mind" (shoshin), or "Zen mind":

The Zen way of calligraphy is to write in the most straightforward, simple way as if you were a beginner, not trying to make something skilful or beautiful, but simply writing with full attention as if you were discovering what you were writing for the first time; then your full nature will be in your writing.
(Introduction to Suzuki 1996, 14)

Students often fear, apologise for, or worst of all, conceal their feelings of ignorance. Convincing the student that it is perfectly acceptable not to know is not just a matter of tolerance and patience – not simply that the tutor should be courteous and unthreatening in his or her questioning. It is a matter of seeing the value in searching for an uncluttered perspective and a beginner's mind. To quote Groucho Marx, "A child of five would understand this. Send someone to fetch a child of five". The benefit for the learner of seeking to find nothing strange is the engagement of intelligence in the Piagetian sense of being "what you use when you don't know what to do" (Calvin, 1996). Attentive, 'childlike' curiosity on the part of tutors and students, and the accidental learning which can result is a gift that being Fool-ish might offer us.

Willeford (1969) writes of confrontations with foolishness which require us to untangle ourselves from our assumptions about the world:

Two Englishmen are riding in a train. FIRST ENGLISHMAN: 'I say, is this Wembley?' SECOND ENGLISHMAN: 'No, Thursday.' FIRST ENGLISHMAN: 'I am, too.' The Englishmen remain placid in what strikes us as their foolishness; they are [not] troubled by their incomprehension of each other... But their behaviour inflicts violence upon our assumptions of what people are and of how they ought to behave... we feel ourselves fooled by the irrational mess that has been made of a conventional conversation; in freeing ourselves from that mess, in which our conscious assumptions about the world have become for a moment stuck, we experience within ourselves the supremacy of the fugitive and irresponsible fool.

The magical force that induces chaos in the presence of the fool often results in a transvaluation of values that could be the beginning of a new order.
(110 – 111)

Good learning is often dependent on the ability to stand back from that which is already known. Alvin Toffler (1970) suggested not only the ability to learn as being central to literacy in the 21st Century, but also the ability to unlearn, and to relearn. Existing classifications of information should not be allowed to prevent us from seeing alternative patterns. Kurt Lewin (1947), in thinking about the challenge of social change, used the notion of "unfreezing" to describe this need to challenge the obviously true in one's cognitive structures. Indeed this can be seen in a very concrete way in the scholarship of physics teaching, where it can be shown that the active removal of incorrect, naive models is an important basis for establishment of more useful, predictive models of physical understanding (Hake, 1998).

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nasreddin>

Perry's (1970) model of the development of the student's epistemology suggests that the learner new to higher studies begins with the view that the truth exists, is out there to be known, and that it is consequently the teacher's job to set it forth, and the learner's job to assimilate it. The view that knowledge is contested and conditional in all sorts of important ways is often a difficult one to arrive at from this starting point. However, tolerance of ambiguity, and a willingness to let go of the security felt in previous learning, can open doors to the complexity of a subject. Tutors in *online* spaces have a unique opportunity to demonstrate the partiality and situatedness of knowledge, much as Nasrudin does, by drawing parallels with that which is so obviously the case in a physical sense – that each learner is somewhere else, and that much depends on perspective. Even those disciplines which would seem to offer the possibility of certainty and objective truth are full of “partially correct” models of the world which serve us well, and have been reinforced on many occasions. The reasons for this are explored in books by Gilovich (1991), and Piattelli-Palmarini (1994).

There is evidence that individuals differ in the strength of their need for cognitive closure. But there is also evidence that a playful or humorous approach by a teacher in a child's early years can encourage that child to be less upset by cognitive ambiguity (Tegano et al 1999). Perhaps it is not too late for the higher education tutor. The jester-teacher, however, must be particularly careful to direct his or her antics away from the audience – to include and involve them without making them targets or demanding self-mockery in return. Even with this in mind, challenging forms of humour, such as satire, can be painful for learners. The actor and entertainer Michael Flanders once said that “The purpose of satire, it has been rightly said, is to strip off the veneer of comforting illusion and cosy half truth, and our job, as I see it, is to put it back again!” Moving away from the comforting illusion and cosy half truth can be a distressing business. Sensitivity and care are needed in order to successfully tutor jest-fully; like juggling or tight-rope walking, there is skill involved. The skill in jesting is to make it look easy and spontaneous, while at the same time being aware of the limits of one's audience: in other words, not to go too far. The tradition of humanitarian clowning may be a useful model here, one whose principal aim is to calm, heal and facilitate: “Most of the time we don't know what rippling affect [sic] our little silliness has in calming situations and opening doors for others to do their work. We are not attached to results. The play of the moment is what is important” (Shobhana Schwebke, hospital clown⁸). There is certainly a place for casting the chaos as fun and excitement, rather than threat and danger, in our role as tutors.

The gentle clown also offers spaces for laughter and fun amongst the serious business of learning (Berk, 2003). “As a pedagogical device, humour can promote various objectives, such as to increase student interest and attention, facilitate the student-teacher relationship, provide students with a “mental break,” or promote the understanding and retention of a concept.” (LoSchiavo & Shatz, 2005, online). In addition, as Berk has found, “humour's primary psychological role is as an emotional response or buffer to relieve physical stress... laughter has been shown to stimulate a physiological effect that decreases stress...” (Stambor 2006, online).

Space for fun and light-hearted moments can be difficult to provide for in asynchronous interactions. However, LoSchiavo and Shatz found that “humour can... help create an online atmosphere that encourages participation, creativity, and exploration” (2005).

⁸ <http://www.hospitalclown.com/InfoPages/What%20is%20a%20Hospital%20Clown.htm>

Complexity, liminality and absurdity

Unlike the jester, part of whose role is consciously and carefully to “speak truth to power”, the fool is often seen as revealing the truth unwittingly, and to the benefit of the audience rather than himself. Shakespearian fools, for example, can “test our capacity to hear truth, in slant, peculiar and painful forms, and to use it to take a few steps in the general direction of freedom” (Edmundson 2000, online). There is much that could be usefully drawn out here about individual fools in Shakespeare:

Touchstone, “a wise fool who acts as a kind of guide or point of reference throughout the play, putting everyone, including himself, to the comic test” (John Palmer⁹), and who travels with the protagonists into the Forest of Arden – the place between – where their fates are sorted out; Feste in *Twelfth Night*, both pivotal to, and slightly removed from, the action of the play; and Yorick, the silent Fool, whose absence deprived Hamlet of an usher “down the road not taken, a road on which he might have found some measure of happiness” (Edmundson 2000, online). Generally speaking, though, Shakespearian fools draw attention to the depth and complexity of things, but often in sidelong ways, in minor roles, and rarely for more than a moment or two at a time – perhaps because the audience, once pointed in the right direction, can do much of the work of untangling complexity themselves.

Indeed, it is necessary that we do untangle complexity ourselves. The online tutor is required to be so explicit and so prepared to have the first word that he or she may forget to leave spaces for the necessary work of the learner in constructing his or her own understanding of the material. These spaces can be a gift, and a vote of confidence: “In Shakespeare, to have a fool attending on you is generally a mark of distinction. It means that you’ve retained some flexibility, can learn things, might change; it means that you’re not quite past hope... To be assigned a fool in Shakespeare is often a sign that one is, potentially, wise” (Edmundson 2000, online). The online tutor can often leap in too quickly, and make his or her guiding or clarifying input as soon as a student is seen as floundering. However, the evidences are that contributions from the tutor can lead to what Jean Wood has called “premature teacher closure of online learning conversations” (Wood, 2003). The temptation for the students is to say “That’s alright then” in response to the tutor’s contribution, and to hear the tutor’s input as definitive. When this happens in a face-to-face tutorial it is obvious, and there is usually the opportunity to repair it. When it happens online, it may not be noticed by the tutor until the moment has passed, and the opportunity is lost forever.

On the other hand, and also following the model of a Shakespearian fool, the tutor *should* try to create a felt presence, so that the group, and the individual student, trusts that the tutor is aware of what is going on and is available to help out should it be needed. This may be an entirely psychological matter, or may be assisted by technology. For example, the manifestation of the presence of the tutor online within systems such as FirstClass, or WebCT Vista or through some application like Microsoft Messenger, or Skype, may serve to encourage and reassure the student. There is no implication here that the student will approach the tutor’s online presence – although this may happen if it needs to – but that a felt presence bolsters the student’s confidence to work, and take risks, on their own.

Turner maintains that the wide presence of tricksters in world literatures:

derives from their liminality, the “betwixt and between” state of transition and change that is a source of myth in all cultures (*Myth and Symbol* 580). As

⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Touchstone>

liminal beings, tricksters dwell at crossroads and thresholds and are endlessly multifaceted and ambiguous" (Smith 1997, 7-8).

Online tutors, like tricksters, are the guardians of liminal spaces and of states of change and flux. These correspond, perhaps, to Meyer and Land's (2005) "threshold concepts". In the case of all online learners, regardless of discipline, one "troublesome knowledge" (Perkins 1999) tricksters guard may be a practical understanding that there is always a position to take:

Interpreter, storyteller, and transformer, the trickster is a master of borders and exchange, injecting multiple perspectives to challenge all that is stultifying, stratified, bland or prescriptive. (Smith 1997, pxiii)

The perceived boundaries of the self are more fluid in this medium (Turkle, 1995), and the online trickster-tutor has the opportunity to be present at this threshold and to demonstrate the power of exploring identity as a way of understanding what we hold sacred about ourselves – the sacred as a point of transition, not a starting point, nor necessarily a place of ultimate arrival. For example, we might consider what the medieval Feast of Fools (a day on which ecclesiastical hierarchies were inverted, choirboys dressed up as priests and elected a "bishop" from among their number, see for example Jung, in Radin 1956) accomplishes by reversals and other acts which straddle the line¹⁰ between playful and radical. To perform a reversal or make fun of something in a Fool-ish or trickster-ish way does not necessarily mean that we are dismissing it. Rather, this is about bringing ideas into sharp relief so they can be examined. Self-awareness, reflexivity and the security of being able to recognise one's own position (at any given moment) is a possible reward for the trouble of entering online spaces with an openness to their difference and our own difference within them.

To provoke such exploration is sometimes to provoke fearful responses, and here, also, the trickster has something to offer. Fear can be a useful catalysing force, but:

The important point here seems to be getting to know our fear, examining it closer, staring at it square in the eye – not as a means of solving our problem, but as a way of undoing old ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling.... The "trick" is getting people to keep exploring and not bail out, especially when we discover something is not what we thought or expected it to be. (Sessums 2007, online)

The trickster has the ability to play with and celebrate ambiguity. S/he prefers chaos to order, and such a preference opens up radical possibilities for structuring (or de-constructing) online learning situations. These possibilities fit well with the non-linear, hypertextual/visual worlds in which online learners and teachers find themselves:

pedagogical methods and intentions rooted in principles of textual stability and the dissemination of knowledge among stable, autonomous subjects [are] often at odds with a medium in which both text and subject are liable to metamorphosis, to the shape-shifting which is so much a feature of our lives in the digital realm. (Bayne 2005, online)

One final story. Nasrudin was said to have ascended on three different days into the pulpit to preach, asking each time whether the audience knew what he was going to say. The first time, they said 'no', to which he replied "What shall I say to you until you do know?", and left. The second time Nasrudin asked, the people said 'yes', and

¹⁰if there is such a line – ludic postmodernism, for example, would suggest that the playful is the radical. See Kellner and Best 1997, *The Postmodern Turn*.

Nasrudin said “Some of you do know already, what should I have to say to you?”, and left again. The third time he asked, and after much discussion, some of the congregation replied “yes”, and some replied “no”. Nasrudin again left, this time telling them that “It were now well that those among ye who knew what the Cogia said should teach those that did not” (Borrow 1884, online).

Along with advocating a Web 2.0-style collaborative pedagogy, what is Nasreddin doing here? He may be poking fun at his followers and their desire to give the correct answer. He is also exposing them to absurdity. The ability to entertain absurdity and paradox is an important part of the process of arriving at new insights: old knowledge and understanding must be disrupted and reconfigured by new ideas or information in order for a more complex understanding of a subject to take shape. Piaget saw this disruption as a fundamental part of cognitive growth (Piaget, 1964). He described the way in which new knowledge, incompatible with existing knowledge structures, brings about a state of cognitive disequilibrium, thus motivating the cognitive resolution that follows. Similarly, Dewey (1934) observed that “equilibrium comes about not mechanically and inertly but out of, and because of, tension”.

We are all inclined to want the safety of feeling sure of ourselves and certain that we have all the answers. Someone needs to come along and prise our white-knuckled fingers off the safety rail, and push us over the side, perhaps with a simple observation: the view is marvelous as you fall. This is what the trickster, fool and jester invite and challenge us to do for ourselves and for our students.

Conclusion

As we have roamed through the territory opened up for us by the metaphors of jester, fool and trickster, we have often found the boundary between what we would wish to say about online ‘learners’ and ‘teachers/tutors’ blurring or dissolving entirely. The possibility that our approach might contribute to some of the ambiguity and surprise that we have celebrated through these characters is both pleasing and troubling. However, we have explored several aspects of what we consider to be fool-ish practice specifically for online tutors. In conclusion, our view is that online tutors should:

- be willing to be the focus of critical attention, and to make themselves impossible to ignore in noisy online spaces;
- support students to question and challenge authority (theirs and others’), but be aware of their own positions of power in doing so;
- model ‘secure not-knowing’ and enjoyment of ambiguity;
- find ways to provide a felt presence;
- allow students to untangle complexity for themselves, in their own context;
- be playful and use humour without making students a target;
- make the sacred a point of transition.

These are not practical “tips for teachers”, and nor do we intend them to be. Rather, they represent a frame of mind: a jester, trickster or fool’s approach to being alongside students in challenging, chaotic, digital environments.

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