

The O-Files

Truths About Online Teaching and Learning Are Out There[1]

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Key Words: teaching writing online; online course design; technology in teaching; patterns of innovation

Abstract

In her plenary address at the 2024 GSOLE Annual Online Conference, the author takes a retrospective as well as projective view of online teaching and learning, considering the television series *The X-Files* as a metaphor for the adjustments teachers have made to thrive as online literacy educators. A constant in the series is the image of files accessed from upright cabinets, holding the promise of truths to be discovered whenever a challenge emerges. Not unlike the agent at the core of this series, many teachers collected files representing successes and possibilities in their traditional teaching, perhaps stored in manila folders, perhaps scribbled in notebooks, perhaps piled on our desks. The move to online teaching triggered new ways of structuring and planning for OWI: O-Files in which teachers save translations of what they once did in F2F teaching restructured for online teaching. In this address, the author looks at innovative O-Files, reflective of the efforts that drive success in OWI: technologies, design, user experience, learner-to-learner interaction, reconstructions of learning, learner-based creativity. O-Files project truths that scaffold forever learning in the contexts of online literacy instruction.

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Toward the end of Spring 2024, one of those wonderful, serendipitous moments of student learning happened in my composition theory and pedagogy class. The students had brought work from other classes to investigate if ChatGPT could enhance those projects. However, Connie, one of the students, wasn't ready for ChatGPT support: struggling with a presentation for an education class, unsatisfied with the appearance of the slides she had constructed using PowerPoint, she pointed at the slide projected on the screen, a slide from that day's class lesson. "I want something that looks like what you do," Connie said. Like a chorus, her group members and I said, "Oh, that's Canva!" Talking simultaneously, we showed her how to access Canva. Within minutes, Connie had transformed what she thought was a lifeless presentation into a colorful, dynamic set of Canva slides. For the remainder of the class, as I walked around working with the other students, I could hear Connie excitedly reporting to all of us how she was transforming her project using the templates, designs, and animations in Canva. It was great to share her learning happiness; it was great to see how so many of her classmates jumped in to help her.

At the end of class, as I so often do when something unexpected happens in a face-to-face class, I mused, "This could never happen in an online class." This awareness of the profound difference between in-person and online teaching is a fundamental truth about online literacy instruction (OLI).

Let me be perfectly clear: I love online teaching. From the semester when I timidly requested my first fully online class, I have thrived in online writing instruction (OWI), constantly experimenting with translating pedagogies for the space of online teaching, which brings me to another truth about OLI: teaching online is exciting, vibrant, and challenging.

Online learning is so different from face-to-face teaching that we have had to relearn, discover, or invent pedagogies specifically for teaching in virtual spaces. Robert Ubell (2017), whose online teaching experience goes back to 1996, points out that "with online learning . . . pedagogy emerges as a necessity," explaining that "instructors walk into most college classrooms without any special training in teaching skills" (p. 7), but online learning changed that. In online teaching, it is difficult to replicate the joy my class and I had in watching Connie learn something new. *But it is not impossible.*

GSOLE 2024 Conference

In January 2024, the Global Society of Online Literacy Educators met for its seventh annual conference. Though we have taken different paths toward online teaching, we share a commitment to fostering productivity, innovation, and success in online teaching. We celebrate the joy we feel in online teaching. And we recognize that online teaching requires recalibration, revision, and translation of the ways we teach.

I venture to suggest another truth: online teaching and learning is here to stay. It is no longer an ad hoc, sometimes frantic response to a global disruption in days and lives and plans. Even though the trauma of 2020 is

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over, there is a niggling expectation in our collective teaching psyche: it happened once because of a pandemic, and it can/will happen again. Which is why we should think and talk about online learning and consider what works, why it works, and what learning we still have to do.

Truths about online teaching and learning are out there.

An *X-Files* Connection

I invite you—if you know *The X-Files* series (Carter, 1993-2002)—to imagine the series theme as ambient music for a few minutes. Even if you have not watched the series, you probably know that it documents the investigations of two intrepid FBI agents, Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, who travel throughout the country to look into cases that defy “normal” explanation.

I had always wanted to watch *The X-Files* but had never made time. In summer 2023, when there was so much media buzz about the 30th anniversary of the show launch, I read article after article and one book before the series relaunch in September 2023, discovering interesting tidbits and facts:

- The “Scully effect” was a statistically provable phenomenon directly attributed to the series: the number of young women in STEM fields and eventual careers increased substantively because of Scully, the female lead who did forensic investigations of the victims (WWEST, 2019).
- The series, ostensibly about finding facts and evidence to explain the unexplained, was scaffolded on an array of episode categories: the alien conspiracy ones, the funny ones, the monster-of-the-week, and some just too different to categorize. But ultimately, it was about searching for *the truth* (Francis, 2023; Robinson, 2023; Tsintziras, 2023).
- The series has an enduring appeal, even 30 years after its initial run, which started in September 1993. As Bethan Jones (2023) explains, “the reason we keep coming back to the show is because of what it tells us about the time we’re living in” (“Introduction”).

Armed with facts, background knowledge, and expectations, my husband and I started watching when the series was released to streaming services. We were immediately hooked by the elements and characters: aliens, government conspiracies, professional friends who might actually be dangerous enemies, green slimy ooze, monsters, evil people, a smart doctor, an unrelenting FBI agent, and the slogan: the truth is out there.

We were not just watching an entertaining story; we were *engaged* intellectually. We watched *The X-Files* with our phones in hand, doing on-the-spot, just-in-time research in every episode, looking for that town in Russia, that town in Florida, that case that sounded really real, that condition that Scully was investigating.

And then there was Mulder’s office.

What Files Mean

For me, it was Mulder’s office that pushed the series beyond compelling fantasy, an office in the basement of the FBI building, an ambient symbol of the FBI’s attitude toward his relentless search for truth. Mulder’s office—the purposeful clutter, the feeble light streaming through the basement window, the repository of past cases, the enormous document projector—was a space of hope, belief,

evidence, records, and possibilities, organized in tall cabinets filled with files.

The first time I saw Mulder's office, I thought, "Wow! This looks a whole lot like my office." I'm not exaggerating. My office is on the second floor, not in a basement, but nonetheless is much like Mulder's office with upright file cabinets, piles of books everywhere, posters, artifacts from past teaching, and filtered light from a large window. I was transfixed by how much my office looks like Mulder's.

A trope of *The X-Files* is the moment when, faced with a puzzling new case, back in his office, Agent Mulder confidently pulls a relevant file from his file cabinet, a file connected peripherally or directly to the current case. The first time I saw him pulling a file, handing it to Agent Scully, arguing for a connection from the past with a current reality, I felt a tiny shiver of recognition and understanding because that's what I do.

In my upright cabinet and long, low credenza are probably hundreds of teaching files, color-coded by class or activity, nicely labeled. What's in them? Handouts, artifacts from specific classes, great student essays, articles that I used over and over in my research, documentation of my teaching.

Let me share a bit about a discolored manila folder labeled "Cindy Essay" with a taped-on label because the adhesive is gone. The file holds a student essay titled "My Closest Friend." The essay is about Cindy, the fabric doll my student received on her first birthday, a doll that comforted her through shots, pneumonia, middle school, and growing up. Here's a lovely line from the essay: "I knew Cindy cared . . . because she had a heart. To make Cindy a loving and caring doll, my Aunt Kathy embroidered a little red heart on her chest." As she grew older, my student let Cindy go. Here's how she ended the essay:

Today, Cindy's resting place is in my cedar chest. Since she was my closest friend during my childhood, I decided she deserved a place in my cedar chest with all my other treasures. When I visit Iowa, I always get her out and look at her and give her a huge hug as a sort of thanks for all the good times and for listening to all my problems.

Looking at the file in the context of Mulder's repository of files, I wondered why this essay had seemed worth saving. I used it for years as a mentor essay. It is not just an essay about a doll but about childhood passages, about friendship, and about leaving things behind and moving toward new things. When students read the essay, they felt that "I can do this" inspiration, which is what mentor essays do. It was a file that enabled me to be a better teacher of writing.

Let me talk about one more file, a yellow file folder in which I saved an entire issue of *The New Yorker*. The south wall of my university office is an enormous picture window that leaks horribly when it rains. The magazine cover is ripped and discolored from a flood in my office. I wrote a Sharpie note on the water-damaged cover in large, black letters: "SAVE. Includes Trouble with FRIES."

Our teaching files symbolize our readiness to work, to move forward, to connect what has been to what we are discovering.

"The Trouble with Fries" (2001) is the fascinating backstory of McDonald's french fries, written by Malcolm Gladwell, the 10,000 hours-to-expertise author (2008). The french fries article is remarkably interesting, packed with details about *potatoes* and McDonald's french fries. For a long time, I used this article as an example of how we can turn an ordinary object (like french fries) into an interesting research project. Yes, I could find this

article online, but having the whole thing in a yellow file folder nestled among my teaching treasures makes this artifact of my teaching much more special.

Back to *The X-Files* connection: our files help us understand the present and plan for the future. The files hold the story of what has been and shape the promise of what can be.

The files we store, organize, and treasure are more than records, more than artifacts. Like Mulder's X-files, our teaching files symbolize our readiness to work, to move forward, to connect what has been to what we are discovering each new day of teaching. Our teaching files form the basis of truths. They remind us of what we have done and what we have yet to do.

Looking in the Teaching Rearview Mirror

When the pandemic happened, I had been teaching online for a very long time, but once upon a time, like you, I was in classrooms with students. The activities, the interaction, the drifting around the class, the workshopping, the laughter . . . this is now what Swartz, Nyman, and Livingston (2021) refer to as "the rear-view mirror of our teachings" (p. 8).

Let's take a moment to look in that rearview mirror. So many things happen in face-to-face classrooms. Think of how you characterize or define your in-person teaching presence. Are you creative, spontaneous, organized? Do you type out lectures? Do you teach sans notes? Do you stroll around the classroom as you teach? Do you perch on the desk? Do you show up 15 minutes before class starts to mingle with other early arrivers? Do you dash in just in time? Do you prepare great slides? Do you ad lib? Do you use props?

Although most of us are back in traditional classrooms, we remember the sadness of those early days when we were catapulted into full-time online teaching in 2020. We missed so much about our face-to-face classes. But, as we look in the rearview mirror, we have to look forward too, toward ways to continually revise, reconstruct, translate, and as Swartz, Nyman, and Livingston (2021) advise, "reflect on favorite and best practices that we felt were essential to better learning and now to find ways to transform interactive, social learning from face-to-face contexts that were familiar to [us], to recent screen-to-screen realities that [we] are confronted with" (p. 8).

I went back to face-to-face teaching, reluctantly, in spring 2023. I had been happily teaching online since 2014; I had redone all my classes to reflect principles and tenets of good online teaching. I won my institution's Excellence in Hybrid and Online Teaching Award. Still, that spring 2023 day, walking into my first face-to-face class after several years of online teaching felt new, exciting, and undeniably vibrant: everyone in the same physical space *synchronously*, a real classroom, late arrivals, shuffling of desks, technical issues with the console, noise, excitement, distractions, synchronicity but also productive chaos.

In contrast, our online classrooms are lists of learners in the classroom or gradebook spaces in our learning management systems (LMS). It occurred to me, not long ago, that my teaching files might now be the materials in my LMS menu bars. I panic every time we get a "purge" message from the university telling us that our past classes are being archived and we will have to request access if we want something. Every time such a purge happens, I lose a lot of files.

When online learning became universal in 2020, those of us who had been teaching online for a while already had different files, what we might call O-files, online teaching files. Maybe not in manila folders but somewhere.

Traditions, Technology, and Possibilities

The pandemic made us think that online teaching was aberrant, temporary, that someday we would all go back to normalcy; but what has happened instead has been a branching out into possibilities that merge traditional teaching and ever-expanding ways of connecting with learners. While online teaching may have been the primary mode of teaching in 2020 and for a while past that, we did not boomerang back to “normalcy” (Kumar & Eisenberg, 2023, p. 3). Most of our institutions have modalities and delivery systems that extend far beyond traditional classrooms: synchronous, asynchronous, distance, hybrid, hyflex, and many other derivative, descriptive terms that reflect the predictive insight of Marshall McLuhan in his classic 1964 book, *Understanding Media*: “Any technology gradually creates a totally new human environment. Environments are not passive wrappings but active processes” (p. viii).

I am struck by how so many years (decades) ago, the connection between space, embodiment, and identity was already being observed. McLuhan identified radical change as an outcome of applied technology, which we recognize today in online teaching and learning. The fluidity of technology creates a space of perpetual revision, change, and new application. Ultimately, however, we are not creating new ways of teaching but are instead translating what we have done—what is already in our teaching files—into a new space, as Melissa J. Kenzig observes:

When translating a course to the online environment, there is actually no need to start “from scratch” in order to create learning objectives. . . . What course developers need to keep in mind is that how students learn when in a room together is different from how they learn individually in an online course. (2015, p. 626)

Online teaching is a different learning and teaching platform; celebrating that difference creates opportunities for growth as instructors and learners.

Creating Our O-Files

In the days when I taught in traditional classrooms, I almost always got a new dress for my first day of the semester. I always created a special meet-and-greet activity. I usually had some sort of prop or manipulative to hand out to all the students, an object obviously or symbolically reflective of writing. I wanted to make a good first impression.

The first thing we lost in online teaching platforms was physical presence. When I started teaching online, it took me a few semesters to realize that students cared that they could not see me. I learned this the first time one of my online students came to my office. She stood in the doorway, stared at me and said, “You don’t look ANYTHING like what I imagined.” What she had imagined was quite unflattering, so, I started putting pictures of myself in my online lessons: me smiling in my home office, me with my granddaughter Penelope in Anchorage, both of us wearing pink sunglasses, me in a traditional classroom with students clustered around the desk, and me showing off my online teaching plaque. Students have told me they love these images.

These photographs, scattered in clusters throughout my computer files, were my earliest O-files: online teaching files. Let me offer a “definition” of an O-file: an O-file is a teaching innovation driven by a pedagogical exigency in the special spaces of online teaching. O-files can be scattered or collected in our digital storage spaces; or O-files

may simply be new ways of teaching that now shape what we do in our online classes. Wherever they are housed or curated, O-files reflect connections between past teaching successes and evolutions into online teaching.

Let's look at another O-file innovation: Teacher talk. In traditional classrooms, teacher talk can be formal lessons, but it can also be banter, instructions, conversation, directions, clarifications, with an immediacy, a "just-in-timeliness" that is missing in online learning . . . unless we learn how to translate teacher talk into online spaces. Here's an example: instead of posting lists of due dates in a module folder, I have started creating 30- to 60-second videos showing what's due when each week. Figure 1 shows an example of how I integrate teacher talk into an online class. The actual video with my narration is only 45 seconds, but is packed with information my freshman writers and dual enrollment students needed to hear *in my voice*:

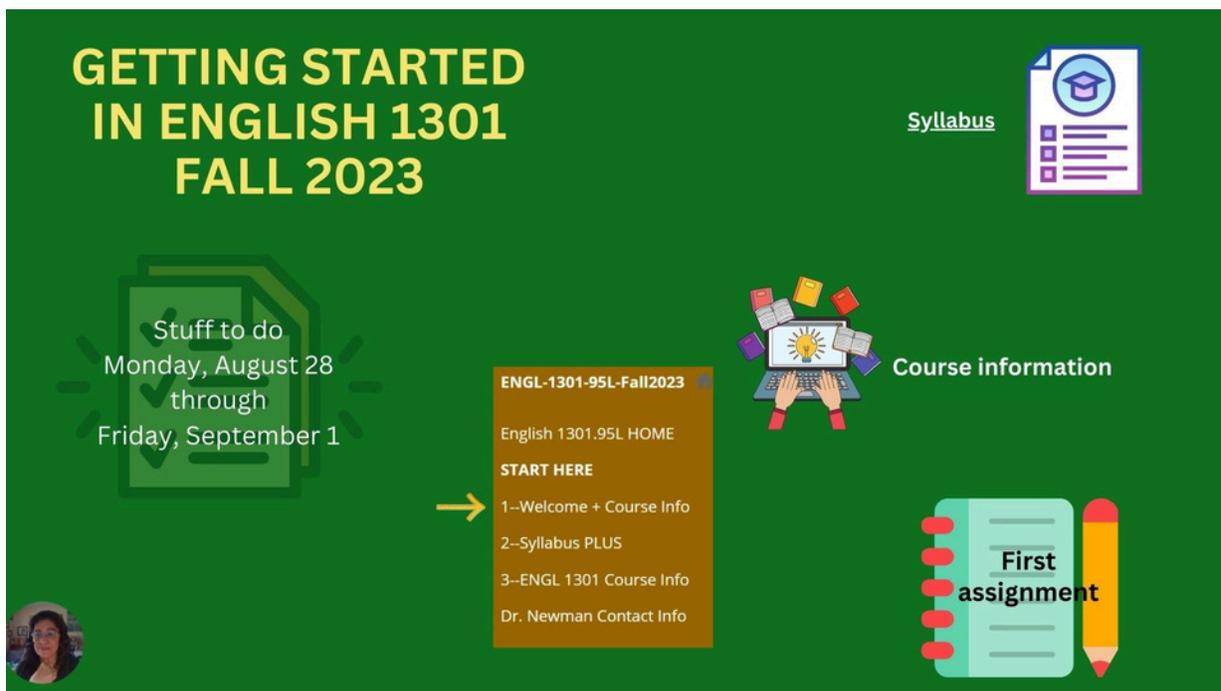


Figure 1. Week 1 "What to Do" Panel for FYW Course

There is something about written instructions that students find off-putting, boring, or even confusing. Conversely, the voice and presence in this 45-second video gave the students an in-class vibe.

To create O-Files for teaching, we have had to see the symbiotic relationship between space and the way our learners embody digital spaces. In his great book about patterns of innovation, *Where Good Ideas Come From*, Steven Johnson (2010) suggests that space is vibrant, alive, malleable: "If we want to understand where good where good ideas come from, we have to put them in context. . . Our thought shapes the spaces we inhabit, and our spaces return the favor" (p. 17).

Our O-files are our repertoire of good ideas shaped by the spaces of online teaching.

Changing the Space of Learning

What happens when technology, pedagogy, and space merge innovatively to trigger creative learning? Figure 2 suggests that effective online teaching is a triangulation of understandings about pedagogy, technology, and space.

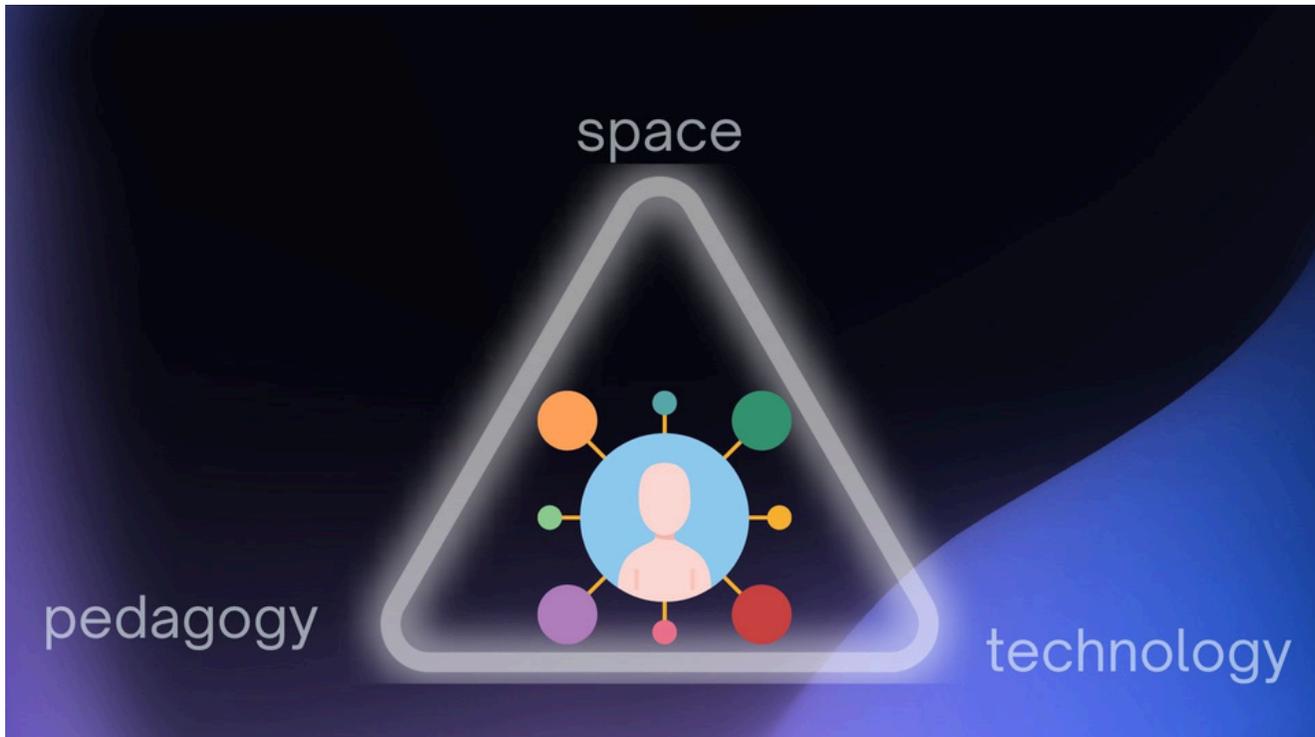


Figure 2. Triangulating Pedagogy, Technology, and Space in Online Learning

We have learned to *design* teaching that incorporates students as users (Coen & Greer, 2023). In online learning, we embody a new pedagogical space that creates intense attention to how learners learn in these new spaces, what Richard E. Mayer refers to as the science of learning in multimedia platforms (2021). O-files connect what we know about teaching to what we understand about how our students learn in online spaces.

Online teaching creates challenges when we assign student work that breaks the frame of “easy” or “expected” assignments. For their culminating course project in fall 2023, my first-year writing students, in a synchronous online class, did multimodal presentations. Multimodal presentations, in my opinion, are challenging even in a face-to-face class. But, from past experience, I knew how enriching multimodality is for students, so I plunged into the project. They picked a film they liked, for any reason. I created several video microlessons on design and visual rhetoric to show them possibilities and to guide them in creating a tight, audience-centered presentation to share findings and reflections about their movie. In our synchronous sessions, we discussed how traditional analysis and research could be translated into a multimodal project. And we looked at several examples from previous classes, all done in traditional classes. In this class, 50% of the students were dual enrollment students, so I expected learner anxiety and possibly some resistance to a non-traditional project. Instead, the students seemed happy about doing a project based on a film they liked! At the end of the six-week module, they viewed and responded to each other's presentations.

In their end-of-course reflections, many of them wrote about how this project impacted their learning. Here are some examples:

1. The film project . . . allowed me to talk about something I really enjoy, which was really cool and it also allowed me to see the different ways classmates see different medias that I have enjoyed, overall it felt like a really great and fun project.
2. I loved doing this project very much; I thought I knew a lot about this movie since I watched it multiple times, but doing this assignment made me have a much deeper understanding all together.

What I like about these comments is that the online environment is not mentioned as a deficit. The students are focused on what they learned and how they changed as learners.

As adaptive as students are to online learning, it is still important to anticipate hurdles that they have to negotiate. In the days before the fall 2023 semester started, I was intent on doing an “inclusive introduction,” a term I learned from my GSOLE colleague Kevin DePew (2023; 2024), who explains that inclusive introductions forge connections with students as we share tidbits about ourselves, our likes, our identities. It took me about four hours to do my five-minute “Meet Your Professor” video for one class, but I felt my time had been worth every second of that effort when students posted responses like these:

1. The welcome video was a really surprising . . . experience. Surprising, in that the rest of the online classes I am taking do not have such a well put together video of professors introducing themselves. I could tell right off the bat that the video must've taken a lot of time to make. In turn, that reassures me in knowing that I am learning from a professor who cares about her students' classroom experience. . . . I am looking forward to take this class! I have taken a long break from school and having a warm welcome to my major like this makes me really happy!
2. One thing that made me feel like if I was in a face-to-face class was the short introduction of the professor. I have had other online courses where the professors don't really introduce themselves, so learning several things about the professor made me feel as if we were in person.

These comments remind us that we make innovations and translations in online teaching *because of our students*. Our students help us see how to be better instructors of online literacy.

Talent Zones and Good Ideas

In one of the earliest books about teaching writing online, Scott Warnock reminded us that “teaching online, like teaching onsite, is about recognizing your teaching talent zones or areas and finding ways to translate those talents to the teaching environment in which you are working” (2009, p. xiv). Talent zones are what we cherish from our former way of teaching in traditional classroom spaces and translate into new ways of teaching in online spaces.

Steven Johnson's (2010) insight about good ideas perfectly explains our trajectory from traditional, classroom-based teaching to thriving in online spaces: “Good ideas . . . want to connect, fuse, recombine. They want to reinvent themselves by crossing conceptual borders. They want to complete each other as much as they want to compete” (p. 22). Johnson discusses seven patterns of innovation that give rise to good ideas. Figure 3 shows the four patterns that most obviously apply to the translation of traditional pedagogy to digital pedagogies.

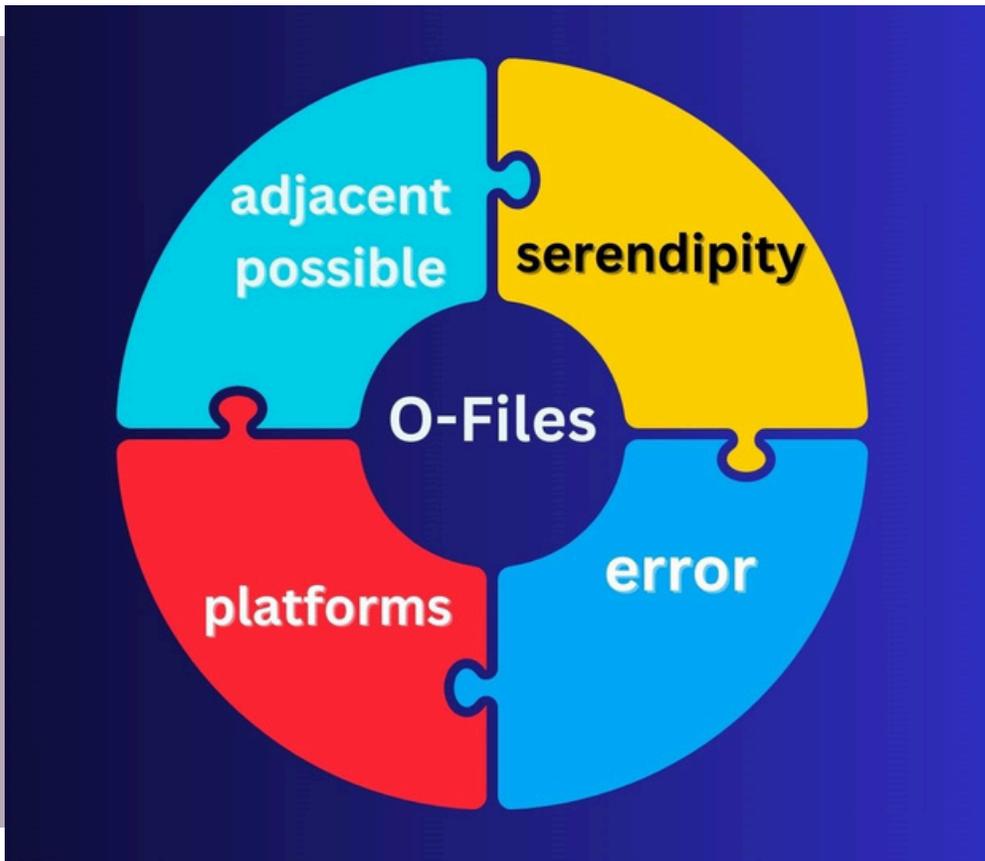


Figure 3. Patterns of Innovation for Online Learning

Adjacent possible means that we adapt new ways of doing things “by taking available resources and cobbling them together to create new uses” (Johnson, 2010, p. 29). Serendipity is an “accidental connection,” “a happy accident [that] completes a hunch, or opens up a door in the adjacent possible that you had overlooked” (Johnson, 2010, p. 108-109). Platform building is emergent behavior that arises from recognizing the properties of new spaces, where “different kinds of thoughts productively collide and recombine” (Johnson, 2010, p. 182-183, 188-189). Error involves the awareness of being wrong, [creating] a path that leads you out of your comfortable assumptions. . . . Being wrong forces you to explore” (Johnson, 2010, p. 137).

Talent zones, discovery, tradition, reinvention—Johnson and Warnock invite us to cross boundaries, think outside the box, reconfigure the box, and be happy in what we discover. Growth and innovation are grounded in what has been: to move forward we need vibrant awareness of where we have been.

O-Files and Life-Long Learning

Online learning is inextricably merged with technology. Holistically, however, online teaching and learning exponentially expand beyond the “sum” of the technologies we draw on. Going back to McLuhan’s (1964) prescient assessment of technology, we must acknowledge that online learning has created new ways of teaching, new paths to learning, and new spaces for shaping thought and innovation: “the hybrid or meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation from which new form is born” (p. 63). Writing so many decades ago about the impact of technology on learning, McLuhan zoomed in on *truth* and *revelation*.

Our O-files matter so much because technology changes so quickly, and sometimes, unexpectedly. Just when we were starting to feel confident and competent in teaching online, we are now faced with Artificial Intelligence (AI), a platform that Sidney Dobrin (2023) describes as “one of the most ground-shaking technological advances that higher education has had to address” (p. 2). Dobrin also explains that new

technologies either become obsolete quickly or “become ubiquitous and naturalized into the background of how we do things” (p. 5). AI may seem new, but the patterns of innovation that set the scene for its impact on learning have been there all along: AI exemplifies the merging of Johnson’s serendipity, adjacent possible, and platform patterns of innovation.

Technology changes paradigms and practices in learning. Change in ways of teaching and learning, including technology and digitality, can create uncertainty or foster pedagogical excitement (Hewett, Bouelle, & Warnock, 2022, p. 396). Records of what we have done, what has worked, what we value in teaching guide our search for truth in and about online learning.

Our O-files are shaped by our forever learning, our drive to keep discovering new ways of teaching so that we can help our students learn and be satisfied in their learning. Forever learning about online teaching is shaped by Mulder-type resolve to keep searching for the truth.

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