Chapter X

Investigating Patterns of Cognitive and Interactive Acts in an Online Student Cooperative Program

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Abstract

Student co-op programs are being increasingly developed to enhance employability skills of college and university students. While most of these programs are taught face-to-face, some universities and colleges are now offering co-op programs online. This article investigates the implementation of a pilot online co-op program, the Bridging Online (BOL) Program, at Simon Fraser University, in Burnaby, BC, Canada. A research methodology, based on transcript analysis of participants’ messages and interviews, was used to address the research questions. Participants in the pilot project found the online version to be a valuable tool to support co-op students in learning and developing employability skills, including problem
defining and solving, planning and goal setting, improved interpersonal communication skills and self assessment, and peer feedback skills.

**Introduction**

As our society is transformed into a knowledge-based economy, higher education institutions are exploring ways of ensuring students have knowledge and skills needed for the workplace of the new economy. Many universities have implemented “co-op programs” to help students develop employability skills through experiential learning in workplace settings. Students alternate periods of full-time school with periods of paid work as they complete their degrees.

While it is clear that co-op programs play an important role in the development of students’ employability skills, a systematic and comprehensive understanding of the learning that takes place in these programs is an ongoing challenge (Johnston, 1996) and is complicated by the fact that valid and reliable data collection is often difficult to obtain. The challenge is further complicated by the emergence of innovative approaches to cooperative education. In particular, the relatively recent introduction of Web-based programs that provide online training and knowledge to co-op students represents a departure from traditional-based programs where the instruction is provided in a brick and mortar environment. As such, what we know about learning in a traditional environment may or may not translate to online programs. If we are to further our understanding of the nature and effectiveness of cooperative education programs, additional research is needed in this emerging area. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to investigate the online teaching of employability skills through a qualitative analysis of a program that was developed and implemented at Simon Fraser University (SFU).

We begin with a brief review of prior research in the area of online cooperative education programs. From here, we introduce the Bridging Online (BOL) Program and describe its background and general features. We then present the research questions, describe the method used in the study, and present the results. We conclude with a series of recommendations for the development and implementation of online programs. Post-script describing changes that were made in response to the results of this study is also presented.

**Review of Research in Online Co-Op Education**

Some initial research has been undertaken with online programs to support co-op students. For example, Northeastern University (in Boston) launched a pilot project for 86 electrical and computer engineering freshmen and sophomores who started their first co-op experience at one of 53 employment work sites across 10 states. The Internet was used to provide students with structured learning assignments during the work period. Students commu-
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