Chapter 5

Interactivity and Immediacy in Online Academic Programs

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ABSTRACT

Attention to the quality issues of distance education in higher education has focused primarily on courses. Entire academic programs are now delivered online, and faculty members must spend a significant amount of resources in addressing curricular-issues of online programs, as opposed to pedagogical issues for the courses they teach. Priorities for instructor interactivity and immediacy can become explicit goals for all learning experiences in academic programs. This chapter is organized in three parts: (1) the value of using interactivity/immediacy in the design of extended learning academic programs, (2) instructional design best practices for developing interactivity and immediacy in online academic programs, and (3) recommendations for different level of academic programs, including undergraduate, master’s, doctoral, and specialized programs, including teacher education, certificates, and professional development.

VALUE OF DESIGNING INTERACTIVITY IN ONLINE ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

The call for increased and improved interactivity between instructor and student in distance education courses also applies to online academic programs. Interactivity and immediacy in courses have been a principal concern of faculty with teaching responsibilities. However, the advising of students that faculty may never meet in person with online programs becomes an important teaching activity. Potential and active students need contact with instructors and staff for information, advising, and human support to begin, move through, and complete an online program. The development of student support systems with new interactive features may increasingly be needed to guide student matriculation in a way that is seamless, automated where possible, and with human contacts as needed.

Student needs are partly informational but also social and emotional, and students view interaction with faculty and staff as the benchmark for quality advising and instruction. Moving academic programs online requires faculty attention to maintain, re-examine, and specify the quality of interaction in courses and advising as an explicit program feature. Thus, one quality measure of online programs becomes
interactivity, the degree to which participants in an academic program develop contact and interaction with the world (Miller, 1973), or as Garrison and Shale (1990) have defined all forms of education (including that delivered at a distance) as essentially interactions between content, students, and teachers.

The characteristics of present and future students suggest that interactivity and immediacy be given high priority as design features to be implemented and evaluated across all features of an online academic program. The oldest of the so-called Millennials (also known as Generation Y) are now in their thirties. Millennials see additional education as programs in which they can apply what they learn and still maintain a social life. Behind this group are Generation Z students, born in the mid-1990s, who want to “grow up” now. Rather than feeling entitled as the previous group is sometimes characterized as, Generation Z students are ready to apply their independence, curiosity, and maturity to real-world activities (Levit, 2015). These future college students may prefer educational programs that interact with the real world and provide the “immediacy” to apply what they are learning. Interactivity and immediacy become marketing key words for future college students now in middle and high school.

The first section of this chapter includes the following subsections: role of interactivity in student success in online programs, features of interactivity to attract students, and the value of interactivity as an accountability measure for program monitoring.

Defining Student Success with Interactivity

How do students view success? Students typically regard success in most academic programs as completing a program and using that program for career purposes (Bauerlein, 2009). Outside any debates about the purpose for college, students in graduate distance education programs in particular see the credentials, whether a certificate or a master’s degree, as leading to advancement or new careers. Students in these post-undergraduate programs still value the quality of the program in terms of courses, faculty, and responsiveness to student concerns as they inquire, apply to, move through, and complete a program. Interactivity may form the central criterion for attracting and keeping students.

Given the quality assurance pressure that has been brought to bear on online courses, online academic programs can include courses and other experiences that are more tightly designed with program outcomes in mind. Thus, the learning outcomes and subsequent learning products from those courses can be examined for their potential in helping students and instructors achieve those program outcomes. In terms of interactivity, the online academic program can be evaluated in terms of the (a) “interaction of the behaviors of students and instructors and (b) interactivity or the characteristics of the technology systems” (Roblyer & Ekhaml, 2000, pp. 1-2). While interaction and interactivity are frequently used interchangeably, considering the differences as defined above can help educators keep the student-instructor, as well as the student-instructor-system, in the foreground of planning, implementation, and ongoing evaluation.

Matching program goals with interactions. Given the vocational focus of potential students, online academic programs could consider the skills valued in real-world organizations and organize their programs along those skills. Wasko, Teigland, Leidner and Jarvenpaa (2011) identify the following organizational skills: (1) leading a large virtual team of people with diverse demographic backgrounds from across the world without any formal authority over these individuals, (2) successfully developing and implementing strategies under pressure, (3) networking to acquire necessary information and resources, and (4) building trust and managing cross-cultural conflict without face-to-face communication (p. 650).
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