Chapter 3
Networking Learners Using Online Asynchronous Discussions

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ABSTRACT

Online asynchronous discussions (OADs) are a prospective tool for creating learning networks that can minimize transactional distance and humanize distance learning. Using it to support effective communication and interaction among learners in video-based distance courses requires special skills and consideration. This research evaluates the use of OADs in a second and third year sociology undergraduate video-broadcast course (VBC). Patterns of participation and interaction were examined using the network and content analysis tools to determine the effectiveness of OADs as a pedagogical strategy. The role of the teacher in establishing a learning network between on-campus and distance students was also investigated.

INTRODUCTION

The degree to which distance learning is effectively humanized depends on how educators address the transactional – rather than the geographical – distance. Transactional distance is the function of the complex interaction between teacher, learner and content, as depicted by the most researched theoretical framework in online learning, the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001). An adapted version of the model is shown in Figure 1. Research has constantly highlighted that achieving an optimum level of one or a combination of these interactions is not straightforward.

Despite the challenges of establishing effective interactions between teachers and distance learners, institutions are increasingly opening up their on-campus courses for flexible delivery. Video-based courses are one example through which small scale on-campus courses are simultaneously offered to masses of distance students (Evans & Hazelman, 2006; Hunter & Austin, 2004). Though video components are thought to exhibit teacher behaviors that can humanize online learning (Dringus, Snyder, &
Networking Learners Using Online Asynchronous Discussions

Terrell, 2010), purely online or face-to-face teaching strategies may not always work for VBCs (Hunter & Austin, 2004). Alternative forms of teaching presence and learner engagement need to be exploited to ensure equitable learning experiences for distance students.

Establishing dialogue at appropriate levels between learners is crucial in developing social presence and personalizing the distance learning experience (Dringus et al., 2010; Kop, 2011; Moore, 1993). Effective dialogues can embody caring thinking (Lipman, 1991) and are positive interactions that improve learners’ understanding of the content (Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell, & Haag, 1995; Laurillard, 2002; Moore, 1993; Swann, 2010). The presence of the teacher should guide learners into being active perceivers of knowledge, thus building their cognitive presence (Lehman, 2010). Peer networking strategies that foster student-student interactions show promise in increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of communication that can humanize the distance learning experience.

A major determinant of dialogue in the teaching-learning environment is communication – the motive for young people’s engagement with social technology (Moore, 1993; Schulmeister, 2010). It offers great possibilities for engagement in learning. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as OADs are the main means of encouraging dialogue and shared construction of knowledge in distance courses.

However, to effectively use CMC to minimize transactional distance, teachers and learners need to adapt to and develop specific skills (Dole & Bloom, 2009; Hunter & Austin, 2004; Laurillard, 2002; Moore, 1993; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 2001; Kop, 2011; Schulte, 2003). Relevant knowledge and skills in the use of contemporary pedagogies and technologies is required for educators to design effective, caring personal learning experiences that are engaging, challenging and participatory (Veletsianos, 2013). The skills and abilities of learners also vary, as does their willingness to apply these skills in educational contexts. The myriad of factors, including motivation and self-regulation, that determine such skills development and related behaviors has been the focus of research for quite some time.