Chapter 9

Contact and Interactivity in Televised Learning: 15 Years Later

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ABSTRACT

This chapter revisits earlier studies on interactive television performed at the same institution in order observe any changes that may have occurred in the types of interaction and contact that students in these types of distance courses experience. This study also compares the findings to an asynchronous, web-based distance course to better understand how interaction and contact change across delivery methods. Findings suggest that little has changed in the ITV classroom, with results being very similar to the original study. When comparing ITV results to the asynchronous class, findings show that, while contact may be lessened due to the lack of synchronous presence, there are still instances of lively interaction that can occur. Asynchronous students do, however, wish for increased use of video-based delivery of course content.

INTRODUCTION

Research on both traditional and online learning environments tells us that peer interaction results in better learning through improved construction of knowledge and negotiation of meaning (Garrison, 2007; Waltonen-Moore, et al., 2008). Social constructionists value the knowledge created during the process of discussion among peers, discussion that is easily supported in a traditional classroom but a bit more difficult to realize in the online classroom. According to the PEW Research Center (2011), 46% of recent college graduates have taken a course online, yet, of those students, only 39% say that online courses provide the same educational value as traditional courses. Meanwhile, comparative studies of distance learning versus traditional learning have found little difference in their educational value (Mehlenbacher et al., 2000). We do know that course format can affect the discourse and communication structures of online students (McCrorry, et al., 2008). Many online courses assume an asynchronous form, where stu-
dents primarily engage in text-based discussion with their peers and instructor. However, live, televised instruction, believed to have been in use as early as 1964 (Lai & Pratt, 2009), can create a virtual learning environment that feels a lot more traditional. This chapter examines distance learners in interactive, televised writing classes, specifically the ways in which these students interact in support of the social construction of knowledge as compared to students in purely asynchronous online courses.

Seventeen years ago, Neff (1998) examined the teaching of writing via interactive television and learned that what we call TeleTech Net “did not prevent students from representing themselves as writers” (Neff, 1998, p. 153). Because technology is ever-changing, Neff advised revisiting this delivery method in the future. Almost ten years later, Whithaus and Neff (2006) examined interactive television and the teaching of writing again, this time with more focus on creating a method for future study of this delivery tool. During this time frame, I was a student enrolled in these televised courses under the tutelage of both Neff and Whithaus. I have now been teaching these courses myself for a decade, and am interested in refreshing their study of writing courses taught via interactive television. This is a pressing issue at my university, among others, where we have recently seen several sites close down as the administration pushes for more asynchronous writing courses to offset the high cost of televised courses. Televised learning involves many costs, including production of live broadcasts and the maintenance of sites to send and receive those broadcasts. Many institutions are turning to purely online courses as a less-expensive option (Graveline et al., 2000).

Mine is a comparative study that applies their coding scheme to both interactive televised (ITV) courses as well as asynchronous online courses and courses using other synchronous meeting software. Skype, Adobe Connect, and the like are being used by some distance writing programs as a least costly synchronous alternative, and should now be part of the conversation when weighing the costs and benefits of ITV. Like its predecessor, this study will use classroom documents, teaching journals, and student surveys to provide a qualitative analysis of the levels of Contact and Interactivity across the different tools.

BACKGROUND

The ITV classroom has been a topic of debate in distance education theory since the early 90’s. Keegan (1995) wondered if ITV can even be considered distance education because of its ability to electronically connect students and teachers in real time. He indicated that the use of time synchronous technologies makes ITV learning virtual education rather than distance education. This is significant because, as he states, “virtual education re imposes much of the constraints of conventional education by requiring students to travel to virtual classrooms at fixed times on fixed days to join a learning group” (p. 19). As with all forms of education, ITV relies upon the interaction between the students and the teacher, as well as the students and their peers. These interactions contribute toward the construction of student knowledge regarding course content, and is known as social constructionist epistemology, or social constructionism, wherein “knowledge [is] negotiated by the people who are to share it” (Clark, 1990, p. 3).

Social constructionism is just one reason why socialization and peer interaction is important to distance learning; socializing with one’s peers helps to create a support system and sense of community. Distance learners often do not have the benefit of experiencing “campus life,” and are at greater risk of feeling isolated from their peers, teachers, and the program itself (Haythornthwaite, 2002). Prior studies have found that students who drop out of or struggle with distance courses are often the ones who most often report feeling isolated in the course (Waltonen-Moore, et al., 2008; Brown, 2001; Bronack, et al., 2000).
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