Dialogue Pedagogical Strategies Perceived to Enhance Online Interaction: Instructors’ Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The advent and success of online academic programs in recent years have prompted many institutions of higher learning to increase the number of courses they offer online. As the number of online courses increases, however, so has a growing concern about the effectiveness of this instructional delivery method in adequately preparing students for further education and career aspirations. This study explored dialogue pedagogical strategies employed by instructors of online courses to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in the online environment. It also investigated challenges faced by instructors of online courses in their effort to maximize students’ learning in this environment. Ten instructors of online courses participated in the study. The analysis identified instructors’ presence, learning communities, instructional differentiation, and strict deadlines as dialogue factors that promote the quality of online teaching and learning. The response data also pointed to dialogue related three issues, namely: student issues; instructor issues; and technological issues that constrain students’ learning in the online environment. Implications and recommendations for educators, instructors, and policymakers are provided.

KEYWORDS
Dialogue, Faculty-Student Interaction, Online Interaction, Student-Student Interaction, Transactional Distance

INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have witnessed a remarkable growth in online education at the K-12 and University level worldwide. The rapid proliferation has been attributed to several factors, including: advances in technology, availability of the Internet, decrease in state and federal funding for schools, rising costs of tuition, an evolving workforce seeking lifelong learning options, and academic leaders’ strategic focus to develop online learning programs (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Kauffman, 2015; Kuruvilla, Norton, Chalasani, & Gee, 2012). These and other factors have been changing the way schools, instructors, students and educational policy makers view education in recent years. Allen and Seaman (2013) observed that, since 2003 when the Babson Survey Research Group first began tracking online enrollment numbers, the number of students taking at least one online course has grown at a rate greater than that of the overall higher education student enrolment. For example, in 2016, more than 63% of higher education institutions reported that online education was crucial to their long-term strategy in the last five years (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016). Allen and Seaman (2013) noted that, almost all courses nowadays at the University level have some online
component, often using web-based technology to facilitate delivery of course documents including syllabi and assignments.

Furthermore, Allen and Seaman (2015) reported that, in 2014, a projected 5.8 million students in the United States were taking at least one online course. At the post-secondary level, about 70% of institutions reported offering online courses, and 32% reported that they offer degree programs intended to be completed entirely online (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). In addition, more than one in every four students (28%) reported taking at least one distance course. A ten-year trend estimate shows an increase from 1.6 million of students taking at least one online course in Fall 2002 to 7.1 million in Fall 2012, representing an annual growth rate of about 16%. For comparison, the overall higher education student body has grown at an annual rate of 2.5% during this same period – i.e., from 16.6 million in Fall 2002 to 21.3 million in Fall 2012 (Allen & Seaman, 2014, 2015). Moore and Kearsley (2005) attributed the rapid growth in online education, primarily, to increase enrollment by working adults (aged 25-50) who want to balance work, school and family, and thus view online courses more convenient, flexible and favorable compared to the traditional face-to-face classes (Allen & Seaman, 2015).

As online education grows, however, so has a growing concern about its effectiveness in adequately preparing students for further education and career aspirations (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Huron Consulting Group, 2014). According to Reiber (1999), many educators are troubled by the fact that education is being equated to just another commodity for exchange via electronic means. Peters (1993) criticizes online education, stating that it reduces education to a kind of industrial production process, lacking the human dimension of group interaction, and even alienating learners from teachers. Peters (1993) compares online education to a mass-production assembly line process where a division of labor (educators and communications specialists) replaces the more craft-oriented approach of traditional face-to-face education. In marshaling arguments in favor of face-to-face instruction over online instruction, Conrad (2002) insinuated that the opportunity to see, hear and interpret levels of learner engagement on a continuous and immediate basis allows skilled instructors to manipulate and improve the status of their lessons. However, the virtual classroom does not permit the existence of such tangible clues to the learners’ levels of engagement (Conrad, 2002).

While several educators and researchers advocate that online instructors should adopt the same instructional strategies that are employed in the traditional face-to-face environment, others feel that different instructional strategies are essential to promote productive interaction in the virtual environment (Benbunan-Fich & Hiltz, 2003; Coppola, Hiltz & Rotter, 2002). Moore and Kearsley (1996) recommended that online instructors use alternate strategies when proposing course structure, when presenting content, and carry out the other processes of teaching in a considerably distinctive ways from face-to-face environments in order to significantly affects learning behaviors in the online environment. For instance, Moore (1989) contend that during student-instructor interaction, the instructor is bound to ‘stimulate or do their best to maintain the student’s motivation in what is to be taught, to motivate the student to learn, to enhance and maintain the learner’s interest, including self-direction and self-motivation’ (p. 2). In Online learning environments, student-instructor interaction may be synchronous to include video-conferencing and chats, or asynchronous via correspondence, email, and discussion boards.

Moore (1993) suggested three types of interaction necessary for successful online education, namely: 1) learner-content interaction; 2) learner-instructor interaction; and 3) learner-learner interaction, and emphasized the need to ensure that all three forms of interaction are in place in order to optimize student’s learning. Hillman, Willis, and Gunawardena (1994) added a fourth type of interaction, 4) learner-interface interaction, arguing that the interaction types proposed by Moore
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