Chapter 10

Relationships in Online Learning Experiences: Identifying and Creating Positive Relationships in Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

A relationship is documented as a personal investment in another’s life. Relationships add to learning environments as substantial to the growth of students. In an online learning environment, a relationship is defined by the mutual agreement between an educator and a learner in which expectations of increased knowledge gained through the education experience provided by the educator. It is evident that in an online environment it is vital to consistently evaluate in order to have the enrichment of relationships between student to professors and student to student. Research has shown that the creation of such environments results in a feeling of community and social presence for the students. Student satisfaction extends to the relationship students feel toward their professors. The strength of the student to professor relationship results in a key component in student retention. The method in which the relationships are established and built in an online environment are vital for student satisfaction and retention of students within a program of study.

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INTRODUCTION: LEARNING IS RELATIONAL

Online education at its core is simply a contemporary extension of the concept of distance learning, which can be traced back to the 1700’s (Harting & Erthal, 2005). Could we also consider a public library as a type of distance education? The famous libraries of antiquity attest to the mission of our ancestors to pass down knowledge they considered fundamental and critical to their descendant’s success. This model of learning also assumes that there would be curious and self-motivated learners willing to invest their time to gain from other’s experiences, and to then expand that knowledge and pass it down to successive generations. Now, as it was then, there is an implied contract, or relationship, between the educator and the learner: the learner seeks knowledge that the educator commits to provide. As consumers when we want a hamburger, we pay a set price and expect to receive a particular product. If we are fortunate, we may be able to engage with the product and increase enjoyment through the addition of some vegetation, dairy, grains and additional protein (i.e. a bacon cheeseburger with lettuce, tomato and mustard). Now we are getting somewhere! While this relationship on its face seems purely transactional, there should be no stigma associated with that implication. A relationship does not have to be exclusively intimate, familial or bound by proximity or time. We can take solace in a much-anticipated book, completing a household task, receiving good news, or just taking some personal time to meditate. Likewise, we can thoroughly enjoy that cheeseburger and/or the service of the individual who provided it and/or the environment in which it was provided and/or the price that we paid. There is a personal investment in all of our life transactions, big or small. These transactions can carry such weight in our lives that our trajectory can radically change through just one positive or negative transaction. Each of these transactions carry the fundamentals of a relationship, and our engagement in these transactions can influence our perceptions of that relationship.

Early human learning is necessarily relational. While small humans have basic impulses and inherent instincts, their true potential for learning is maximized based upon the knowledge, skills and goodwill of their caretakers. That caregiver-child relationship acts as a conduit through which the individual grows and develops. Over time, and with varying degrees of success, the young human grows, and their learning is expanded and aided by extended family relationships, social relationships, and cultural-social institutions. While each of these relationships is unique, individuals are still learning in relationship with each other. Primary education is based in large part on a series of relationships (with teachers, peers, school and community). This model has persisted for quite some time, and is more or less a collaborative process among the participants; although admittedly the young person’s willingness and intrinsic motivation to learn can fluctuate due to a variety of factors.

How Can Educational Relationships Be Measured Reliably?

For the sake of online education, let us utilize the following parameters to define a relationship: a mutual agreement between an educator and a learner in which the learner has expectations of increased knowledge gained through the education experience provided by the educator. But measuring the quality and depth of online education relationships is difficult. The research regarding online educational relationships is scarce; although there is certainly no shortage of student survey data. Student surveys are a primary means to help educational institutions gauge their student’s perceptions of the programs (Lowenthal, Bower, & Chen, 2015). These surveys, however, focus more on teacher feedback, content feedback and overall student experiences, not on the student’s relationships to others or the content. It is