Chapter II

Can You Hear Us Now?  
Stances Towards Interaction and Rapport

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Abstract

This chapter examines two key factors that influence the efficacy of online learning: student and teacher interaction and rapport. These two factors are heavily influenced by the stance that the learner takes. Online learning is opening up more possibilities for lifelong learning. This chapter will provide a critical discussion of online education, the theories that ground this delivery system, and the challenges that one university faculty had in creating a community of learners in a technology-mediated learning environment. “Let’s put our Reading Masters courses online,” the Dean suggested. “We need to move our graduate course offerings into the twenty-first century. Can’t be left behind.” She left the six of us in the conference room to talk over her proposal. But what was there to discuss? The answer was “No.” It just wasn’t possible. We’d lose that personal connection with our students that our university is known for. We’d lose those rousing discussions and meaningful interactions. Why, the students wouldn’t even see each other, let alone see us. How could we encourage lifelong learning when we weren’t even sold on the idea? The whole idea was impractical, unworkable, and inconceivable. Putting our courses online? Out of the question!
That was four years ago. Since then there have been a few changes in our attitudes toward online teaching and learning. We now have face-to-face courses and an online Master of Education in Reading program, both identical in content and rigor—and both reflecting our pedagogical beliefs in the importance of the affective factors in creating a community of learners. This chapter shares our observations and new understandings as we examined the reactions and interactions of our students in our online courses.

Introduction

Lifelong distance learning is no longer a novel experience but rather an expected offering of most institutions of higher learning and is gaining strength and popularity in graduate programs across the nation (Lao & Gonzales, 2005). Between 1995 and 1997, the number of classes offered online in two- and four-year institutions has nearly doubled, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2002). In the 1999-2000 school year, 124,240 people earned a master’s degree in education (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Of these students, approximately 12% participated in some form of online learning. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2003) reported that in 2000-2001, 89% to 90% of public two- and four-year degree-granting institutions offered some form of distance education. Additionally almost half of the four-year institutions offered online degrees.

This chapter is a description of one faculty’s journey to develop an online program, as well as an exploration of the nature of online interaction and rapport. Believing that instructor and student stance highly influences the online experience, we will offer some suggestions after describing an analysis of our students and instructors.

The benefits of online learning have been widely explored in the literature (Benbunan-Fich & Hiltz, 1999; Maher & Jacob, 2006). The one benefit heard most often is the elimination of the need to travel to go to classes (Barkley & Bianco, 2001). Students find themselves “in class” with others from all over the state and nation that results in an exchange of a wide variety of ideas, experiences, and opinions. As one graduate student of ours remarked, “Being with such admirable educators from different states has made me realize that we truly do have a powerful force across this country.” Distance learning also allows students to choose when, where, and how long they will engage in course materials thus allowing for more control over learning preferences (DeRouin, Fritzsche, & Salas, 2005; Laferrière, Lamon, & Chan, 2006; Lin, Cranton, & Bridgall, 2005). This can be seen in a quote from a final course evaluation:
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