Chapter XI

Interpersonal Assessment: Evaluating Others in Online Learning Environments

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Abstract

This chapter introduces and discusses the concept of interpersonal assessment. Interpersonal assessment refers to the act of assessing what other participants in an online learning environment know and how they behave. Interpersonal assessment is critical for successful learning outcomes, especially in collaborative groups, since students need to know what others in a group know and how they act to be able to work them. Moreover, knowledge about participants has implications for self, peer, and group assessment. Although interpersonal assessment is important for both online and traditional learning environments, it is often more difficult to assess others in online learning environments due to the lack of face-to-face interaction, mediated cues, and unshared contexts. In this chapter, I review the literature to support this thesis theoretically and look at evidence from preliminary data analysis of an online class. I also suggest future directions for research and practice.

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Interpersonal Assessment: Assessing What Others Know and How They Behave

In this chapter I introduce and discuss a critical aspect of assessment that is often overlooked in online learning environments research and design—assessment of other participants’ knowledge and behavior. Assessment has traditionally been understood and used as a method directed at evaluating the product of an educational exercise or the producer. In education and learning literature, assessment usually refers to assessing student learning. The title of a recent National Research Council (2001) report sums it up: “Knowing what students know.” But over the last decade, the concept of assessment has evolved with the change in educational practice (Dochy, Segers, & Sluijsmans, 1999). We have started to move away from a teacher-centered perspective on education to one that involves more peer interaction and group activities, and assessment practices are also changing in part to reflect the change in educational practice, although such a move is not without its problems (Broadfoot & Black, 2004; Segers & Dochy, 2001). Group assessment, peer assessment, and self-assessment are increasingly becoming a part of educational practice leading to a need to examine the social aspects of such arrangements (Meldrum, 2002; Reynolds & Trehan, 2000). In such a scenario the concept of interpersonal assessment assumes significance as its study is yet underrepresented in the literature. And even though assessment in e-learning is not fundamentally different than traditional face-to-face environments (Macdonald, 2004), there are some differences such as increased student reflexivity (Lea, 2001). Mediation by technology for communication changes the nature of social interaction in online environments and has the potential to affect assessment.

Interpersonal assessment refers specifically to the perceptions participants have about what others know and how they behave. This knowledge can range from information about how competent a peer is at a particular task to how helpful she is to others. Knowledge about other participants in a learning environment has several benefits. Information about other students can help in forming groups, facilitating teamwork, and increasing overall interest and participation levels in a course. Interpersonal knowledge is particularly important in classes where students have to work on group projects. In such instances, knowledge of what others in the group know and how they behave determines the success of group members to work together and to learn.

In traditional face-to-face learning environments, students and teachers come to know about each other as they interact over time. Through one-on-one interaction, observations, and conversations with each other, in class and out of class,