Chapter 13

The Role of Learner in an Online Community of Inquiry
Instructor Support for First-time Online Learners

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ABSTRACT

Students experiencing an online educational community for the first time experience adjustment in the role of learner. Findings from a study of adjustment to online learning from the instructor’s point of view validate five main areas of adjustment identified in previous research: technology, instructor role, modes of interaction, self-identity and course design. Using a confirmatory research model, instructors from two open and distance institutions were interviewed. Data confirmed that instructors also perceive adjustment in the five areas of online experience identified by students. In addition, student adjustment in these five areas can be understood in light of core dimensions of learner role requirements in an online community of inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000). Instructor comments provide understanding of the experience of online learners, including the challenges, interventions and resolutions that present themselves as unique incidents. Recommendations for the support and facilitation of adjustment are made. Funding for this research was received from the Athabasca University Mission Critical Research Fund.

INTRODUCTION

The move to online delivery in post-secondary education institutions has increased exponentially over the last decade. Early concerns were raised about the extent to which students would embrace online education. However, recent evaluation of student enrolment in online courses indicates much willingness to engage; optimistic online enrolment projections are now a reality and there are implications that growth will continue. “Online enrolments continue to grow at rates faster than for the overall student body, and schools expect the rate of growth
The Role of Learner in an Online Community of Inquiry

...to further increase.” (Allen & Seaman, 2004, Introduction, 3rd para.). Eighty-one percent of all institutions of higher education in the United States offer at least one fully online or blended course and 67% recognized online education as a critical long term strategy for their institution. In the United States enrolment of online learners grew to approximately 3.5 million, a 21 percent increase since 2002 (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

As growth continues, more and more students will experience online education. Students will require new skills to be competent online learners, and will modify behaviours from classroom learning to fit the online environment. The new skills include the ability to be socially and cognitively present (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005) by interacting with others, sharing experiences and demonstrating exploration, integration and application of content knowledge. This requires, in particular, the ability to overcome limitations in social and academic interaction precipitated by the lack of visual and verbal cues available in face-to-face learning. Otherwise, understanding content and constructing knowledge will be limited to what one can foster on one’s own (Piccard, 1997; Rice; 1992).

The context then, of teaching and learning in online environments, is very different from long standing classroom structure in that it depends upon different technologies, unique communication processes, instructors operating from a distance, multimedia instructional materials within an involved course design and a new student identity (Collier, 2001). According to Wilson, et al. (2003), “there is also (sic) a need for better understanding of students’ adaptation to online learning over time.” Adaptation to the role of online learner can be understood by looking at the structure of the online pedagogical environment (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000) and tenets of role theory (Blau & Goodman, 1995) and how role change occurs (Turner, 1990). The integration of new behaviours into one’s role repertoire (Kopp, 2000) occurs in a context (Katz & Kahn, 1978) and through an intricate process of role taking, role exploration and role making (Blau & Goodman, 1995). As such, the newness of the online environment will act as a catalyst for role adjustment for individual students moving online.

This paper replicates the study of adjustment identified by novice online students (Cleveland-Innes, Garrison & Kinsel, 2007), from the point of view of the instructor. Instructors from two open and distance institutions were interviewed regarding the online experience of teaching. Responses were coded and categorized according to five categories of adjustment identified in earlier research: interaction, instructor role, self-identity, course design, and technology. This data was then analyzed a second time to aligned with each of three online presences: cognitive, social and teaching presence. This data validates the earlier areas of adjustment, and gives a view to what instructors do that may support or hinder adjustment. Recommendations are made for incorporating actions or activity into design, direct instruction or facilitation in order to ease adjustment for learners new to the online environment.

Literature Review

Online Community of Inquiry

Learners experiencing an online educational community for the first time can explain the adjustment required for participation. Findings from a study of adjustment to online learning environments validate differences found in three presences in an online community of inquiry. Using pre- and post-questionnaires, students enrolled in entry-level courses in two graduate degree programs at Athabasca University, Canada, describe their adjustment to online learning (Cleveland-Innes, Garrison & Kinsel, 2007). Five areas of adjustment characterize the move toward competence in online learning: interaction, self-identity, instructor role, course design and technology.