Chapter 10

Blending Synchronous and Asynchronous Interactivity in Online Education

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ABSTRACT

Online education is characterized by conflicting variables of time, space and interactivity. In response to the market pressure for time and space flexibility, interactivity between student-student and student-teacher usually suffers. Literature reports lack of interaction as the prime reason for reduced quality in online and hybrid courses. This chapter emphasizes the need to balance time, space and interactivity through appropriate blending of tools of interactivity so as to maximize learning as well as business outcomes. Experience related to blended use of various synchronous and asynchronous tools of interaction is shared.

INTRODUCTION

Interactivity is crucial to learning. It facilitates cognitive involvement, enabling free flow of ideas and development of behavioral skills which are otherwise difficult to learn and transfer. Need for improved interactivity has been one of the key drivers in pedagogical shifts in teaching and learning methods. Case based teaching, class discussions, team assignments, in-class presentations, game simulations and role plays are some of the widely adopted interactive methods to map to different learning objectives in a face to face setting (Bonner, 1999; Van Auken & Chrysler, 2005).

However, interactivity, the much sought after ingredient to effective teaching and learning is often a topic of debate when it comes to distance education. While the need for time and space flexibility is driving even the established brick and mortar institutions towards distance mode of education, maintaining the desired quality of interaction between distant people has been a challenge. To counter this imbalance between time, space and interactivity, educators in their individual or organizational capacities also adopt hybrid forms of education by blending face to face interactions with one or more
forms of distance education. E.g. bundling limited face to face contact hours with a conventional correspondence based course or providing an option for some online courses with a conventional face to face degree course. However, studies on student satisfaction and engagement still report lack of interaction as a significant weakness of online or hybrid systems while rigidity of time and space continue to be the major weaknesses of a face to face system (Beard & Harper, 2002; Jackson and Helms, 2008). In view of the rising need for time and space flexibility and various resulting patterns of education, it is imperative for educators and administrators to innovate and use the right mix of interactive tools and technologies so as to deliver quality of education at least no less than that in face to face setting. A well implemented online education system holds the potential to reach even beyond the capabilities of face to face setting (Kim & Bonk, 2006) and may even become the paradigm of the future (Hutchinson, 2007). Realization of this depends on how institutions handle the imbalance between the critical factors of time, space and interactivity.

This chapter explores the need and feasibility of blending synchronous and asynchronous interactivity as a way to balance time and space flexibility with the need for quality of interaction. Towards this objective, the chapter aims to:

- Explore the relevance of various forms of interactivity in online education
- Share current practices and related issues in blending synchronous and asynchronous interactivity in an online graduate business school.
- Bring out the suitability of webinars for synchronous and multi-directional interaction between students and teacher.

The remaining chapter is organized as follows. Next section sets the context for online education and related environment variables viz. time, space and interaction. It then shares the current practice of blending synchronous and asynchronous modes of interaction in a predominantly asynchronous, online management course. Related issues, recommendations and directions for further research are presented in an attempt to step forward towards a seamless education suitable to the needs of individual students.

**BACKGROUND**

With the advent of information technology, many new forms of distance education have evolved in an attempt to make education much more interactive. Such variety of forms have been given different names such as e-learning, m-learning, web based learning, technology enabled learning, online education and so on. Quite often, these names have been used interchangeably and difference between them is somewhat blur. For the purpose of this chapter, online education is used as a term to refer to all variants of distance education, where Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is used in some proportion as a medium for education delivery. Irrespective of the medium, every variant of education ultimately strives and should strive to achieve higher student satisfaction and improved learning outcomes.

Earlier, the only variants of technology based distance education were radio / television for unidirectional lecturing or telephone for personalized tutoring. Over the past two decades, ICT has emerged as an effective substitute. As a result, interactive CDs and hyper text have come into use for instructional design based on text, audio, video and animation thus making way for self paced learning. These days, podcast offers an alternate to radio / television based lecturing and as a means to decrease the cost of production and distribution for institution and to increase the time and space flexibility for learner. Conference based technologies are being adopted to facilitate any-where-fixed time (virtual) class rooms with synchronous interactivity. To take care of stu-