Chapter 2
Hybridizing Online Learning with External Interactivity

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ABSTRACT

One approach to hybrid learning is to hybridize online learning through recognizing and including external interactivity. This chapter examines that possibility. After reviewing the nature of interactivity and individual learner experience in online learning communities, it presents a recent study of interactivity in online professional development learning by practising teachers. From that study emerges the importance and scope of external interactivity between the learner and his or her local community of colleagues, friends, and family in a learning community beyond the traditional online class. Building on that case study, and indications from the literature that its implications may be generalizable, the chapter suggests ways in which external interactivity can be recognized and included in the online learning environment – as a way of hybridizing on-line learning through its inclusion of learners’ interactive engagements in the external learning communities that they bring to their studies.

INTRODUCTION

Interactivity in education and learning is a topic that is attracting renewed attention in education, especially with the increasing importance of online learning (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Giguere, Formica, & Harding, 2004; LaPointe & Gunawardena, 2004). It is seen as being important to the processing of content and the creation of new understandings (de Bruyn, 2004; Hawkes, 2006; Williams & Humphrey, 2007). What is not so clearly understood, however, are the ways in which interactivity functions for individuals and groups whose learning is increasingly taking place outside the traditional face-to-face methods, supported and managed by information and communication technologies in online learning environments. Such learners, crucially, are still located by time and place within their local communities.

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The notion of interactivity here captures those actions and impacts by and on the elements of an educational or learning event that influence the nature and outcomes of the engagement (Anderson, 2004; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Wagner, 1997). The perspective taken in studying and managing interactivity is, correspondingly, commonly centred on the learner – focusing particularly and variously on: interactions between and among learners; those between the learner and the educator, teacher, tutor, or instructor; those between the learner and the content; and, especially in online or hybrid learning engagements, those between the learner and the educational interface (Hillman, Willis, & Gunawardena, 1994; Hirumi, 2002; Moore, 1993).

These dimensions of interactivity focus singularly on components of the educational event itself. They exclude possible influences that are located beyond the traditionally recognized boundaries of the event – influences such as the learner’s family, work, and friendship communities and relationships. Such influences tend to be externalized in educational planning and management. Their potential influence on learning processes and outcomes, though, raises the question of whether and how they might usefully be recognized and engaged in educational planning and management. This question is, perhaps, particularly pertinent to educational events that are essentially online, since it is arguably in such events that learners are most likely to face limitations from traditional forms of educational interactivity, especially those involving other persons.

The question is addressed here by firstly examining the nature and role of interactivity in learning. The chapter then presents a case study which challenges traditional concepts of educational interactivity as being essentially internal to educational events. The implications of that case study for educational design and management are then articulated as an approach to the hybridization of educational engagements, before drawing out conclusions from the analysis.

The role of interactivity in learning encompasses differing perspectives, due to epistemological assumptions about the role of human interaction in education and learning. Salomon and Perkins (1998) have described two conceptions of learning: first, the concept of the individual learner, which emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge and cognitive skill and, second, the socio-cultural concept of learning, which emphasizes the participatory aspects of context, interaction, and situation. In both conceptions, interaction is seen to be essential but present in different forms. As early as 1933, John Dewey described the interaction for the individual learner as internal interaction, and saw it as necessary to the process of transforming inert information into meaningful knowledge (Dewey, 1933). Holmberg (1983, p.115), speaking particularly to distance education, referred to this process as the “guided didactic conversation” that occurs as a student interacts with content. While not denying the value of individual interactivity, the more participatory, socio-cultural concept of learning encompasses and depends on a broader range of interactivity between learners, instructors, and other learners (Jonassen, 2002). This social definition of learning has been supported by Wenger (1998, 2000) who argued that the act of knowing is a matter of displaying competence defined within a social community, but always in interplay with individual experience.

Until recently, interaction between learner and content, and to a lesser degree interaction between learner and teacher, have been the mainstays of distance education (Anderson, 2004). Web-based technologies and Internet access have increased markedly in the last 10 years and distance learning, infused with information and communication technologies, has evolved into a medium of exchange that allows for faster and better communication between learners and educators, and
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