Chapter 10

Using Role Play and Team Teaching as Strategies to Add Depth to Online Discussion

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ABSTRACT

This is a review of an action research project dealing with the impact of a role playing activity in an online course. Two instructors of an online graduate course collected observable data based on response and participation levels of students in an online discussion setting. Subsequently, utilizing the same discussion topic, the instructors combined for a course delivery team teaching and role playing approach to the discussion. In the second course the instructors assumed the roles of John Dewey, Mao Tse-Tung, and Aristotle and exchanged responses and comments with each other and with students. A comparison of the levels of responses between the two approaches utilizing the same rubric allowed to measure the impact of role play and team teaching. A review of research related to team teaching and role playing as approaches to enhance discussions provides background to decision to utilize these two approaches to enhance the discussion process.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching online courses presents challenges for the instructor in pursuit of creating an environment in which exchange of ideas and demonstrations of deep levels of understanding are displayed. The instructor must stimulate discussion between the instructor and the students and among the students. The instructor must also insure students attain a deep level of understanding without utilizing familiar teaching techniques that are only effective in a traditional setting. Finally, the instructor must create, maintain and evaluate the course and student knowledge levels in relation to course objectives. Achieving these goals calls for a major commitment of time, content knowledge, interactive discussions with students, and effective assessment and feedback for student work.
The online instructor needs to meet course objectives through effective utilization of strategies and resources. Research has provided insights into the massive amount of time required for the construction and conducting of an effective online course (Hunt, 2009; Stagg-Peterson & Slotta, 2009). Reviewing of research related to online teaching points out an online approach can consume even more time and energy than teaching, face to face, in the classroom, as the instructor had to be perceived by students as being “right there” online with them, leading by example with time, energy, and commitment, or students’ participation would quickly fade. The position that online courses can require more time and commitment than most face to face courses has been maintained since the early commitment to the creation of such a delivery system (Cavanaugh, 2005; Dunlap, 2005; Maddux, 2004). It is this understanding of the commitments of time and ongoing assessment that led to an exploration of the possibility of having a team of teachers present an activity in this course. Sharing the load, in terms of the role play in the discussion, could be accomplished by having two instructors take active roles in the discussions.

The beliefs of the instructors for a successful implementation and application of both strategies, team teaching and role playing during discussions, centers on the view that if students are to function adequately beyond the artificial classroom environment, they must realize that important issues are complex and open to numerous and often contradictory interpretations. They must come to terms with the paradoxical nature of knowledge. The opinions of experts are no more valid than the boundaries of their academic fields, their professional training, and their personal talents and biases (Yang, Newby, & Bill, 2005). College students need to understand that neither reason nor the scientific method provides us with absolute certainty, and that “Ultimate Truth” does not reside with any one discipline or individual. Initially, students will be surprised, disturbed, even frustrated by the unusual atmosphere of a team-taught class. Instructors must be aware of this potential reaction, and help their students adjust. Otherwise, students become totally confused and some might simply give up trying (Shafer, 2008).

Also conditions for conflict in the process of team teaching are abundant. Folger, Poole, and Stutman (2005) characterize such conflict in the context of the possibility of interferences with one individual’s views or focus. The question arises as to course configuration, different instructors assuming leadership roles in differing modules of the course or a complete integration of subject and pedagogy (Shaprio & Dempsey, 2008). All of these are issues that need to be dealt with by the instructors for a successful implementation of their course.

This action research effort was to meet these challenges and it was made in the context of a course on education philosophies based on the use of a discussion board in a unique, interactive manner. Interactivity in an online course serves the purpose of maintaining student interest and forming a learning community involving both the students and instructors. The search for aspects that improve this interactive environment and online learning is worthy of exploration in the context of fostering the effectiveness of online instruction. Creating and providing instruction for these courses led to concerns related to the levels of interactivity in each course, the amount of time required for course construction, and the depth of understanding provided through course interactions.

The course instructor began to make an examination of changes that could be made in the course to enhance the discussion process to make it more effective. Two issues arose as to what strategies could be utilized in bringing about deep levels of understanding in regards to content and its application in various contexts. Issue one was the amount of time individual instructors spend dealing with all the aspects of online courses leading to an examination of the possibility of employing