Chapter 8
Building Knowledge through Dynamic Meta–Communication

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ABSTRACT
Sharing knowledge through collaboration and community using distance learning tools is an important component of today’s 21st century education. Distance learning is growing in educational institutions worldwide, and instructors are developing enhanced teaching strategies focused on incorporating meta-communication that engages and empowers students in their quest for understanding. This chapter focuses on knowledge building through interactivity, social engagement, and communication technologies in a distance learning environment. Emphasis is placed on online collaboration and community building to encourage collaborative learning and ultimately knowledge acquisition. Theoretical constructs surrounding social constructivism and practical application to instruction are provided to the reader to enhance a distance learning course using meta-communication strategies.

INTRODUCTION
The focus of this chapter is on building knowledge through dynamic meta-communication in an online classroom. The ability to apply knowledge principles can improve student learning and new knowledge creation as well as knowledge sharing and application within the course environment.

Knowledge management is a strategy that helps to identify and distribute knowledge so that a transfer of knowledge and learning takes place. It is a systematic coordination of instructional technologies within the classroom – either online or face-to-face - to enhance knowledge sharing and intellectual growth. Within this chapter, emphasis is placed on creating an optimal learning environment within the context of distance learning and how best to bring students together
so that they can exchange information and focus on knowledge creation, transmission, transformation, and eventual assimilation of course content to add and create value.

The growth in distance learning is staggering. Since early 2000, online enrollments have been growing substantially faster than overall higher education enrollments with over 4.6 million students taking at least one online course during fall 2008. This is a 17 percent increase over the previous year during which the overall higher education student population saw only a 1.2 percent increase in growth (“Learning on Demand”, 2009).

The growth in distance education courses shows no signs of slowing down anytime soon. As more longitudinal research becomes available, the results appear to confirm that online courses are working for students. They provide dynamic and diverse ways to interact with course content from different locations around the world, given that an Internet connection is available. According to research completed by Sloan-C: A Consortium of Institutions and Organizations Committed to Quality Online Education, more than one in four higher education students reported taking at least one class online (“Learning on Demand”, 2009).

As distance learning evolves, so too does the value and excellence within online education. Within the online environment, more and more instructors are incorporating meta-communication models into their courses to create collaborative and supportive learning opportunities. This chapter explores three meta-communication constructs that influence high-quality teaching and effective student learning in a distance learning environment:

1. interactivity,
2. social context, and
3. communication technologies

As distance educators look to incorporate various strategies, methods, and technology tools to provide online learners with quality teaching and equitable access to content, instructors must also be aware of and integrate effectively interactivity, social context, and appropriate communication technologies into the course environment to engage learners in the process of learning the course objectives (Tu & Corry, 2002). A constructivist model of collaboration, communication, and interactivity comes to the forefront of the course planning process.

The constructivist theory has the potential to provide a rich didactic communication model that can provide diverse opportunities for learners to test their mental models with other learners through active participation and manipulation of content. This begins the process of knowledge construction through a social and blended context. This chapter explores the meta-communication model of collaboration and community through the practice of active learning modalities and communication technologies, all within a knowledge oriented context.

BACKGROUND

The Meta-Communication Model

The meta-communication model of interactivity, social context, and appropriate communication technologies requires students to participate in reflective thought and applied analysis, which in turn must be communicated to peers and the instructor through dynamic participation. This active engagement in an online social learning context embeds collaborative communication technologies into the process of learning. Students are therefore afforded the potential for higher level thinking due to opportunities presented by other learners as well as the instructor to challenge their understanding through a meta-communication method.