Chapter 13

Students’ Evaluation of Online Discussion:
An Ethnographic Construction of Learning Contexts

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a study in which different learning contexts in an online discussion were constructed, and the effects of these contexts on learning were explored. From a qualitative analysis of data, six themes emerged and were organized to four learning contexts in online discussion: (1) social cultural context; (2) face-to-face classroom context; (3) online context; (4) technological context. The learning contexts in online discussion were then classified into two categories: emotive context and cognitive context.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars and educators increasingly believe that the use of online educational technologies has been changing practices in higher education (Twigg, 2003). Because the implementation of online learning technologies varies from class to class, studies of online learning technologies should go beyond online interactions to broader learning contexts (Kern, Wave, & Warschauer, 2004; Warschauer, 2000). Any research that examines such ideas of broadening learning contexts, thus, has a great deal to offer a growing number of educators and educational administrators. Such research can also serve as an important foundation for future
examinations into what factors can affect learning in online contexts.

This chapter presents a study that investigated students’ perceptions of learning contexts in online discussion and the effect of the perceptions on student evaluation of online learning. To examine these issues, the author focused on how students constructed learning online contexts based upon their perspectives related to learning in the classroom. The results of this research revealed four learning contexts and their effects on learning outcomes. In examining these items, this chapter contributes to our understanding of online education by expanding the focus on online interactions to the broader social, cultural, and technological contexts of online learning.

AN OVERVIEW OF ONLINE LEARNING

Mixed Research Results of Online Learning

The literature on online learning contains mixed research results relating to the topic. On the one hand, a number of studies found positive learning outcomes resulting from the inclusion of various online learning technologies into the educational process. Some studies, for example, reported on the introduction of online discussion to supplement traditional classroom learning. These works also reported increased student involvement, better learning results, and higher learning grades resulting from the uses of online media (Connolly, MacArthur, Stansfield, & McLellan, 2007; Dede, L’Bahy, & Whitehouse, 2002; Sauers & Walker, 2004; Twigg, 2003). Other research compared online discussion with face-to-face discussion and discovered that students who participated in online discussions achieved a higher level of skill development, increased participation, better collaborative thinking, and more ideas generated than peers participating in exclusively face-to-face discussions (Bronack, Riedl, & Tashner, 2006; Davies & Graff, 2005; Kramarski & Mizrachi, 2006; Rodriguez, Ortiz, & Dvorsky, 2006). Additional studies have noted that the use of online discussions in classes can result in students reporting an increased sense of satisfaction and feeling a greater sense of community (Aitken & Shedletsky, 2002; Connolly et al., 2007).

Other research, however, has reported different findings related to online learning. In some cases, researchers found that students in online classes scored lower on course tests and final exams than did their counterparts in conventional versions of the same class (Waschull, 2001). Moreover, students in online classes seemed more likely to fail the class than did their peers enrolled in on-site versions of the same course (Waschull, 2001).

In yet other instances, researchers have found similar levels of learning success when comparing online and on-site instruction relating to the same course or subject. For example, in one study of online and classroom courses in three community colleges, Benson et al. (2005) found no differences in students’ motivation, satisfaction, and learning outcomes between online and face-to-face classes. Clark and Jones (2001), in turn, found no real difference in students’ ability to develop public speaking skills when they compared face-to-face and online versions of the same public speaking course. Similarly, after comparing online and face-to-face versions of the same accounting class, Basile and D’Aquila (2002) found no significant differences related to students’ attitudes toward the course. More recently, Benoit, Benoit, Milyo, and Hansen (2006) examined the differences between traditional face-to-face and web-assisted instruction. After comparing the grades for speech assignments and end-of-semester overall grades, they found no differences between learning – as indicated by grades as a sign of success – for online and face-to-face students.