Fostering Interaction to Enhance Learning in Online Learning Environments

Jared Keengwe, University of North Dakota, USA
Gary Schnellert, University of North Dakota, USA

ABSTRACT

Interaction is central to educational experiences in online learning environments. Interaction enhances learning by fostering three types of learning interaction: learner-instructor; learner-learner; and learner-content. Additionally, online students generally perceive interaction as an effective means of learning. Therefore, it is important for online instructors to create opportunities for interaction in online learning environments. This article stimulates reflections on the critical role of interaction in online learning. A primary implication based on the challenges reported in the study is that instructors need to reflect on effective ways to design and implement successful online learning environments. For instance, instructors could anticipate these challenges by focusing on the development of online tools such as wikis to enhance effective online interaction.

Keywords: Distance Education, Interactions, Instructors, Online Learning, Online Technology, Students

INTRODUCTION

The number of distance learning courses has dramatically increased in many universities across the nation over the past decade (Thompson & Ku, 2006). This exponential growth could be attributed to affordability and accessibility of computers and Internet technologies for many learners (Dobbs, Waid, & Carman, 2009). In addition, the flexible options afforded by online courses – that allow learners to access classes anytime and anywhere – is a perfect match to the busy lifestyles of the 21st century learners (Leonard & Guha, 2001).

The role of distance educators is not to teach course materials to students directly, but rather to facilitate learning and enable peer interactions to flourish (Thompson & Ku, 2006). Further, interaction plays a major role in enhancing performances of learners in online learning environments. Bing and Ai-Ping (2008) argue that communicative interaction is a central concern to quality teaching and learning in web-based distance education. Simonson (2000) added, “The more interaction there is in distance class, the better” (p. 278).

Three distinctive interactions that exist within online education include: Student-to-content, student-to-interface, and student-to-instructor interactions (Thompson & Ku, 2006).
2006). Puntambekar (2006) argues that a critical component of collaborative learning is the interaction of the individual and learning activities between divergent perspectives and shared knowledge building. Tu and Corry (2003) add: “The obvious characteristics of collaborative learning is knowledge sharing, inspiring one another, depending upon one another, and also applying active social interactions” (p. 52).

Collaborative online learning involves a complex process that considers the richness of instructors-to-online students’ interactions and online student-to-student interactions (Salmoni & Gonzales, 2008). Online collaborative learning environment serves a unique function that connects and encourages learners to interact and establish their communities within an online setting (Cameron, Morgan, & Williams, 2009). The creation of a sense of community is critical in online collaborative learning environments because it helps to create successful faculty-to-student interactions and a sense of social presence in online courses (Woods, 2002).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is grounded on three theoretical constructs, namely interactivity, social context, and technology (Tu & Corry, 2003). Interactivity within online learning settings refers to interactions of learners and instructors – an incorporation and engagement of learners inside active collaboration activities. A social context refers to the establishment of learner-centered collaboration activities and a social learning community. Thus, a successful online collaborative learning community is one where the members can connect and engage intellectually, mentally, socioculturally, and interactively in order to achieve their common learning goals via electronic communication technologies (Tu & Corry, 2003).

There is evidence to suggest the potential of technology to supports and enhance knowledge development and knowledge management within online collaborative learning surroundings (Brush & Saye, 2000). For instance, technology tools help learners to elaborate on what they are thinking and to engage in meaningful learning (Jonassen, 2000). Specifically, learners can use technology as intellectual partners to: articulate what they know; reflect on what they have learned; support the internal negotiation of meaning making; construct personal representations of meaning; and support intentional, mindful thinking (Jonassen, 2000). In this context, technology becomes an important issue in group learning (Tu & Corry, 2003).

Interactivity provides a way to motivate and stimulate learners. Additionally, it offers a way through online discussion technology for instructors to support learners to consider and reflect on the content and process of teaching and learning. In other words, the quality of technology-based interactions will depend on the choice and application of appropriate technology tools. Technology tools that foster learner engagement with content and learner-teacher interaction will enhance a more successful online learning experience (Dabbagh, 2007).

Purpose of Study

Rapid technological innovations have created opportunities for students to conceptualize, design, and fascinate collaborative learning (Treleaven & Ceceea-Keemanovis, 2001). Students can now work together, achieve and share their understanding, and also co-create knowledge within web-mediated environments. Technology provides a shared working space that is easy for instructors to exchange information with students (Ciges, 2001). However, the quality of instructional communication is a vital feature to enhancing meaningful interactive relationships between instructors and students in online learning environments (Woods, 2002).

Two-way Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) that is central to online interactive learning refers to communication tools such as electronic mails, bulletin boards, and real-time discussion boards. These tools are essential for establishing interactions, communications, and relationships between students and teachers. Even so, CMC has the potential to enhance and
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