Chapter V

Collaboration or Cooperation?
Analyzing Small Group Interactions in Educational Environments

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Abstract

This chapter illustrates how computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) can be used systematically to investigate online communication. It argues that intended outcomes of learner interactions, such as meaningful dialogue and joint knowledge construction, must be identified and analyzed to better understand the effectiveness of online learning activities. The CMDA approach is illustrated through analysis of a synchronous chat held by a three-person graduate student group as it completed a course assignment at a distance. Findings from the analysis reveal that while all group members participated in the task and communicated with mutual respect, a cooperative rather than collaborative approach was taken, and group members did not challenge initial opinions. These findings can assist with the future instructional design of such online learning tasks. It is hoped that this chapter provides guidance to researchers in identifying intended outcomes of online collaboration and utilizing CMDA to determine whether the outcomes have been met.
Introduction

With an ever-increasing number of courses and programs being offered at a distance via the Internet, instructors and course designers are now faced with the challenge of determining what works best for teaching and learning in these environments. In residential educational environments, most interactions among learners and instructors occur in the classroom, during office hours, or even in the hallways. Obviously this type of contact is not possible at a distance, so teaching at a distance requires different instructional strategies for facilitating learner interactions.

A lack of interaction has frequently been cited as a major weakness of distance education. High attrition rates have always been a concern in distance courses (Simonson, 2000; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2000), and feelings of isolation and frustration have been attributed to the lack of interaction among learners who may be situated around the globe with minimal to no face-to-face contact (Hara & Kling, 2000; Vrasidas & McIsaac, 1999). Increasing the opportunity for interaction has thus been identified as a critical component for successful online learning (Hirumi & Bermudez, 1996; Moore, 1989; Roblyer & Ekhaml, 2000; Schrum & Berge, 1997; Vrasidas & McIsaac, 1999; Wagner, 1994).

The emphasis on interaction also arises from current theories of how people learn. Social constructivism emphasizes the negotiation of meaning and construction of shared understandings by learners through dialogue (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998; Bonk & Kim, 1998; Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell, & Haag, 1995). Interaction and dialogue are also the key components of social learning theory (Bandura, 1971). Vygotsky’s (1978) view of learning as a social process occurring within the zone of proximal development also positions interactions as crucial to the development of patterns of thoughts and behaviors.

Kearsley (2000) argues that “the most important role of the instructor in online classes is to ensure that there is a high degree of interactivity and participation” (p. 13). Defining interactivity and interaction continues to be the focus of much discussion in the distance education field. Moore’s (1989) distinction between learner-content interactions, learner-learner interactions, and learner-instructor interactions is quite useful in this regard. Learner-learner interactions have typically been the weakest in distance education environments. Today more substantial interactions among learners are possible through communication tools such as electronic mail, Web-based discussion forums, and synchronous chat. Of growing interest to researchers and practitioners is how students communicate and learn with these tools.

This chapter outlines types of learner interactions, cooperation, and collaboration that may be facilitated through the instructional design of online tasks. It then identifies some intended outcomes of these interactions and illustrates the use of a promising research approach, computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) that can be used to systematically analyze interaction at a distance.
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