Chapter 21
Addressing Online Student Learning Environments and Socialization Through Developmental Research

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The chapter looks at the online learners in the course to distinguish whether interactivity and an online community was established. This case study also considers the shift that took place in the learners’ focus from simply participating in an online course to reframing their understanding of the course content and whether this holistic approach reflects both the students’ and instructor’s learning objectives and anticipated outcomes. Design, development and implementation of online learning environments have predominated distance education research over the past fifteen years. Since 2006, dynamic communities of learning have begun to emerge that encompass a more expansive learning environment, addressing the needs of adult

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BACKGROUND

The university that provided the course and sample student population was a small public university located in the southwestern area of the United States. The course was titled INST 6137: Technology and eLearning and the research was conducted during the Fall 2008 semester, from August 2008 through December 2008.

At the beginning of the course, there were 13 subjects enrolled and, due to different personal reasons, four dropped the course within the first week, and nine students went on to successfully complete the course. Three of the subjects were male, and six of the subjects were female. Concerning the subjects’ ethnicity, one subject was African American, three Mexican-American, one American Indian, and five Caucasians. These students had several aspects in common:

- They were Instructional Technology degree-seeking graduate students.
- They had successfully completed a minimum of 24 graduate-level course credits (8 courses) within the graduate degree program of study.
- All had successfully completed the majority of their graduate-level courses within the online learning environment.

The online course was designed with innovative course features, such as embedded metaphorical representations and innovative classical music underlays, to enhance the course atmosphere, support the learner’s developing conceptual frameworks, and engage learners in multi-sensory stimuli. Multimedia components were integrated with graphics, audio, video, interactive gaming, and web conferencing to help re-frame basic online text-based content. There were also some activities designed to let students experiment with Moodle (Moodle.org, 2008) learning community features.

The researcher who was embedded in the course had been designing, developing and teaching online courses for at least ten years. In addition, the researcher had developed collaborative research partnerships with colleagues, such as the second researcher, who were interested in affective elements, like icons, metaphors and narratives, which seemed to mediate recognizable symbols with new materials and enhance students’ conceptual frameworks of understanding. The study of affective elements has recently become a primary consideration within online learning envi-
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