Chapter II

From Transactional Distance to Transactional Control

...there is a psychological and communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner. It is this psychological and communications space that is the transactional distance. (Moore, 1997)

Introduction

This chapter lays the theoretical foundations which will eventually lead to a set of recommendations about how e-learning environments should be used and constructed. The theoretical foundation draws heavily from Michael Moore’s theory of transactional distance, concentrating on the dynamics that underpin it. The theory also draws upon D.R. Garrison’s notions of control and Philip Candy’s views on learner self-direction, developing a consolidated model that suggests a logical equivalence between the dynamics of Moore’s transactional distance and (particularly) Candy’s notions of control. A new name is given to this distilled model: transactional control, to distinguish it from the psychological aspects of dialogue that are also implied by transactional distance. The theory of transactional control suggests that a key systemic feature of a learning trajectory is the level and pacing of choice, who makes the choices in the first place, and how those choices constrain further choices and the choices of others.
Transactional Distance

Michael Moore’s (1973, 1980, 1997, 1996) theory of transactional distance has been justifiably influential among distance educators as both a descriptive and a generative theory. This view of distance sees the most important differentiating factor between educational transactions not as the physical distance separating learner and teacher but the transactional distance, loosely speaking related to the amount of communication between them. Among Moore’s great contributions is the realisation that distance is a pedagogical, not a physical phenomenon. The notion that it is transactional, not physical distance that is of most significance when considering any educational transaction, is powerful and useful, allowing educational systems to be classified and characterised based on deeper, underlying, structural features rather than simple physical separation. More significantly, it allows falsifiable predictions to be made about educational systems. Although Moore’s theory is long in the tooth in the fast changing world of e-learning, it remains as relevant as ever. Tait (2003) explains, in the context of newer theories of e-learning:

The fact that Moore’s theory remains, in my view, the crucial framework of ideas against which such assertions as represented here can be tested gives weight to my initial thesis that there is a deal of continuity in e-learning from second generation distance education that is not acknowledged: perhaps inevitable when a radical interruption by a technology occurs. Now, however, is the time to stand back and reflect on what has changed and what in terms of learning theory remains broadly speaking the same.

Transaction distance is concerned with the relationship between three variables in distance learning: structure and dialogue (concerning the relationship between teacher and learner) and autonomy (an attribute of the learner).

Structure and Dialogue

For Moore, transactional distance is primarily measurable in dimensions bounded by structure and dialogue. Broadly speaking, the greater the structure, the greater the transactional distance. The greater the dialogue, the lesser the transactional distance. This notion is taken a step further by Saba and Shearer (1994) who claim to establish that there is a reciprocal relationship between the two: the greater the structure, the lesser the dialogue and vice versa. Saba and Shearer’s research involved the application of system dynamics combined with a form of discourse analysis that attempted to extract from an online (televisual) class those occasions when the teacher was in control and those where the learners were engaged in dialogue. They
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