

Online Interaction and Threaded Discussion

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INTRODUCTION

Human beings are social creatures who habitually communicate with each other and share among themselves. Human interaction is the interchange of suppositions, intentions, and meanings. As a vital thinking and socializing tool, interaction is essential for every human activity and is a complex symbolic process in which meaning is created and negotiated as persons in conversations coconstruct their social realities (as cited in Comeaux, 2002). In fact, "The formation of opinion takes place through conversation of individuals with members of groups to which they belong or through that inner conversation of thought which is outer conversation imported into the mind" (Mead, 1938, p. 616). Mead's "inner conversation of thought" supports the claim that human beings are meaning driven by not only the result of social interaction, but also meanings reprocessed through interpretation (Blumer, 1969).

In traditional face-to-face instruction, interaction is central to the teaching-learning process because, "True interaction produces a cohesive classroom group where teacher and students share responsibility for the defining, carrying out, and evaluating of the learning experience" (Gorman, 1969, p. 31) in addition to "providing information, expressing feelings, stimulating others, making social contact, controlling others, and functions related to contact seeking and role playing" (Keegan, 1996, p. 117). Hence, interaction, as a crucial means of facilitating learning, is "intrinsic to successful, effective instructional practice as well as individual discovery" (Sims, 1997, p. 158). As instruction shifts from face-to-face toward online learning, interaction is endowed with its capability to interact diversely (i.e., many-to-many, many-to-one, one-to-many, one-to-one, one-to-self). Such nonlinear, multifaceted interaction may not only "provide both teachers and students with a communications environment rich with opportunity for reflection" (Hart & Mason, 1999, p. 153) but also

"change traditional classroom interaction patterns, shaping the communicative roles of the teacher and students as participants in a classroom learning community" (Kumpulainen & Wray, 2002, p. 10). Seen in this light, this article focuses on attributes of online interaction and patterns of threaded discussion. Future trends are also discussed so that distance instructors and their learners can achieve satisfactory results through dynamic teaching and learning conversations that focus on guided but socially shared activities by making the most of technologies.

ONLINE INTERACTION

Learning evolves from learners' interaction with many elements including those of learner-human, learner-non-human, and learning environments. Hence, interaction level (communication, participation, and feedback) between the instructor and learner(s), among learners, and with nonhuman resources may have a major impact on the quality of distance learning. To understand the complex instructional online interaction, Yacci (2000) demystified interaction as having four attributes: (1) a message loop, (2) its complete occurrence starting from and back to the learner, (3) content learning and affective benefits as two distinct outputs, and (4) mutually coherent messages. Interaction as a message loop is a precondition for interaction to occur because a circuit of messages between students and instructors must be completed. Interaction as a complete occurrence from and back to the learner is viewed from a learner perspective. For example, asking a question and responding to it is a complete loop from a teacher's perspective; however, from a learner's perspective, the interactive loop is not complete because of the instructor's failure to provide feedback to the learner's response. Interaction as content learning and affective benefits reflects the idealistic interaction outcomes in the instructional

process. In other words, affective benefits (e.g., emotions) as a result of interaction can be used to promote social presence, sense of community, and mutual engagement among participants. Thus, content learning in mediated online learning situations may be maximized. Interaction as mutual coherence of messages suggests the shared meaning between each circuit of messages can greatly reinforce both cognitive and affective meaning of messages conveyed in the interaction process. Overall, these four attributes are interrelated and each is constructive for online instructors to properly design and successfully manage their online courses.

More thoroughly, Bannan-Ritland (2002) defined online interaction as (1) learners' participation or active involvement, (2) specific patterns and amounts of communication, (3) instructor activities and feedback, (4) social exchange or collaboration, and (5) instructional activities and affordances of the technology. Bannan-Ritland's (2002) definition is comprehensive and signifies online interaction as participatory, engaging, pedagogical, managerial, social, collaborative, and technology-dependent. Further, interaction as "specific patterns" is largely indicative of Yacci's (2000) attributes of interaction. More important, amounts of communication and feedback are noteworthy because they basically serve as the starting point for achieving sustained, two-way communication between and/or among the participants. As a result, distance learning may stay away from the traditional correspondence course model of independent study.

Interactive Relationships

Several forms of interactive relationships exist in distance learning such as personal vs. social (interaction context), physically embodied vs. mediated (interaction mechanism), synchronous vs. asynchronous (interaction temporality), and threaded vs. linear (interaction structure). An important contribution made to distance learning is Moore's (1989) elucidation of the three interactive relationships: learner-to-content, learner-to-instructor, and learner-to-learner. In Moore's exposition, learner-content interaction concerns the process of intellectually interacting with the content that may bring about changes in learners. The interaction between the learner and the instructor emphasizes the frequency and intensity of the instructor's influence on the learner as amplification to learner-content interaction. Finally, learner-learner interaction occurs among learners of an

online setting with or without the real-time presence of an instructor. Such interaction may enable learners to join and form a learning community to deal with specific course content. However, Hillman, Willis, and Gunawardena (1994) argued that treatments of the interaction concept in distance learning based on Moore's discussion of interaction are inadequate. Thus, they added the learner-interface interactive relationship, which concerns the interaction between learner(s) and a technological medium that must be comprehensible for him/her to produce any effectively consistent action with content, instructor(s), or other learners.

The interactive relationships among learners, instructors, content, and interface may generate different instructional foci, activities, and functions in distance learning. For example, learner-instructor interaction may be the center of attention in traditional face-to-face instruction while learner-content interaction may be the focal point in computer-mediated instruction. With growing interest in collaborative learning and the use of computer networks, learner-learner interaction may provide an avenue for further support of each other as well as a mediated channel to meet the socially and/or instructionally shared expectations accomplished synchronously or asynchronously. As regard to learner-interface interaction, mastering the learner-interface interaction technique is "a process of manipulating tools to accomplish a task" (Hillman et al., 1994). As a result, learners are likely to participate more in designed activities and effectively communicate with the instructor and peers in mediated online learning environments.

Pedagogically, Paulsen (1995) presented a framework that includes one-alone, one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many interactive relationships. One-alone interaction largely concerns making use of online resources such as information (online databases, online libraries), software (online applications), people (online interest groups, individual experts), and independent learning (reflections, syntheses, evaluations). Hence, this type of interaction is rather traditional, suggesting that the interaction is task-oriented or content-focused. One-to-one interaction involves the use of e-mail communication to support individual interaction within a group. Satisfactory one-to-one learning interaction may result from individualized teaching and learning activities such as learning contracts, apprenticeships, and so forth. One-to-many interaction focuses on presentation (lectures, symposiums) to learners by one or

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