Chapter 5.6
Fostering Meaningful Interaction in Health Education Online Courses:
Matching Pedagogy to Course Types

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ABSTRACT

This research study examined the best interactive practices of effective health care education faculty from six major universities that offer online health care programs. Program directors from six major universities identified effective faculty, from which twelve faculty members were interviewed to uncover effective practices and an additional thirty faculty participated in a Delphi study to identify and prioritize effective practices. The findings for this study indicate that different types of facilitation approaches are needed to generate adequate interaction in four distinct types of health care courses, i.e., foundational classes, skills classes, analysis/synthesis classes, and hybrid type courses.

INTRODUCTION

Wlodkowski (1999, 1985) suggests that effective instructors must have expertise, empathy, enthusiasm, and clarity, a conclusion that is relevant whether the teaching takes place in traditional face-to-face settings or in online formats. Interaction with the student is a central factor in demonstrating each of these elements. Effective instructors have discovered interactive practices that work well in face-to-face classrooms. The challenge for online instructors is to discover how to replicate effective interaction practices within the online, asynchronous learning environment. As with traditional face-to-face teaching, there are methods and techniques that work in some venues and not in others. Strategies that foster effective

interaction in an engineering classroom may not offer the same efficacy in a healthcare program. Effective teachers are willing to explore why certain interaction techniques work and don't work in order to discover the most effective techniques for their particular educational programs.

Knowles (1999, 1980) and Rogers (1969) argue that adult education teachers serve as facilitators, providing the resources to enhance and facilitate the self-directed learning opportunities of their students. Such an understanding of the role of instructors is particularly pertinent to the online asynchronous arena of higher education systems, where educators must design a variety of courses for a variety of learners. Effective instruction requires that teachers understand the changing needs of their learners based upon the nature of the educational program. In other words, an effective instructor does not approach each learning situation with the same pedagogy and style. Different styles of course require different techniques to facilitate success learning. Knowles (1980) suggests the specific learning needs of the particular participants of a given learning activity must be diagnosed. Understanding the unique needs of different university and college programs at graduate and undergraduate levels in different disciplines will go far toward enhancing interactive teaching practices online. Regardless of the mediated nature of the communication, "It is the teacher's responsibility to precipitate and facilitate learning that has purpose and is focused on essential concepts and worthwhile goals" (Garrison & Archer, 2000, p 48.). Adults and distance-education students relate in an interactive collaborative construction of knowledge, a system that typifies many of the concepts of adult education theory (Anderson, et al., 2002). The dilemma facing online instructors is how best to accomplish the designing, facilitating, and guiding of a predominantly text-based learning arena to best foster the different levels of interaction required for learning success.

BACKGROUND

In conducting online teaching, interaction needs to be planned to facilitate learning. Vrasidas and McIsaac (1999) found that structure can affect interaction, and concluded that educators need to design courses to foster learner-to-learner interaction and dialogue. Kozma (1991) agrees with the need for less structure and more dialogue and suggests that learners should actively collaborate in order to construct knowledge rather than relying solely on knowledge gained from direct instruction. For such collaboration to occur, learners must feel a sense of connectedness with the group (Gibb, 1995).

Howland and Moore (2002) found that when students initiated interaction with instructors and other students, knowledge was often built spontaneously, such as through students guiding the direction of discussion-board threads. Such student leadership then led to positive results for others. One student said, "Several times, I have seen questions asked by others that had not even occurred to me to ask and the answers benefited me" (p. 188). Swan (2001) found that students with higher levels of interaction with their classmates through online discussion also reported higher levels of learning and satisfaction from courses. Rovai and Barnum (2003) also found evidence that student perception of learning from online courses was positively related to course interaction, lending further support to the need to provide opportunities for online students to learn by active interaction with each other and with instructors. Effective online instructors develop highly interactive material and facilitate participation in online discussions. Rovai and Barnum also suggested that passive interaction, analogous to listening to, but not participating in, discussions, was not a significant predictor of perceived learning in the present study. Consequently, using strategies that promote active interaction leads to

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