

Chapter 5.14

Peer Learning and Social Interactions in an Asynchronous Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how Internet-based asynchronous communication forums utilized in teaching undergraduate courses affect social interactions and student satisfaction. Drawing from an analysis of qualitative data, such as student and teachers' perceptions, this case study reveals four key factors that affect learner satisfaction: (1) trust of people and technology, (2) awareness of how technically-mediated interactions differ from face-to-face interactions, (3) peer-based learning opportunities, and (4) integration of relevant learning materials and opportunities for social engagement. The findings suggest that when asynchronous forums are used as the principle vehicle for communication and learning, students feel less socially isolated, report a sense of belonging, and positively evaluate learning outcomes. The case study identifies asynchronous electronic forums as an effective tool for peer learning and social interactions among upper-level distance education students in Australia.

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INTRODUCTION

Electronic communication has irrevocably changed the way learners and educators approach education. Internet-based communication forums are one specific venue in today's network society enabling and facilitating dialogue across cultures, geographies and generations. This chapter explores some key issues facing developers, users, and evaluators of software for distance education. Drawing from distance education learning and teaching experiences in Australia and conceptualised within a global learning environment, this chapter emphasizes advantages and disadvantages of incorporating asynchronous electronic forums as educational technology in teaching advanced sociology subjects.

By presenting empirical qualitative data, informed by the social theory of Symbolic Interactionism, this chapter demonstrates how Internet-based social interaction technology can enhance learning and communication among undergraduates by creating a shared purpose and awareness among otherwise isolated users. The study presented here

is contrasted with recent e-learning research that questions both the utility of specific communication technologies as well as the pedagogical appropriateness of their application. The overarching objective of this chapter is to provide an alternative perspective. Distance education technologies are often characterized as mediocre and supplemental tools whose primary purpose is to augment traditional classroom-based learning. In contrast, this chapter reveals how the adoption of asynchronous forums as the principal learning and communication vehicle in a senior-level correspondence-based distance education course resulted in enhanced student satisfaction. It is argued that high-quality social interactions pursued for the purpose of higher education can be attained virtually, without face-to-face interaction, although the interactions experienced may differ in a number of ways. Ultimately, while identifying and acknowledging the complexity of virtual communication, this research questions the fundamental assumption that virtual classrooms are *a priori* inherently inferior to those occurring face-to-face.

BACKGROUND

Social interactions exist and are understood from both lay and professional vantage points. In this section a sociological definition of social interactions is offered to inform and conceptualise the ensuing analysis of student-student and student-teacher interactions occurring in asynchronous subject forums. The present case study seeks to offer researchers, practitioners, and users theoretically grounded, yet concrete and tangible advice, on users' and designers' perceptions and experiences in a distance education environment. The research purpose is to inform users and planners of distance learning courses about asynchronous forums as communication, interaction and networking tools to facilitate learning and student engagement.

Social Interaction and Knowledge Society

From a sociological perspective, social interaction involves tacit knowledge, shared meaning systems and negotiated agreements about the norms, purpose and process of communicating. Classical symbolic interactionists, such as George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman, provide a useful theoretical framework to understand social interaction as fluid, mutable and subjective. According to Goffman (1967, p. 9), "the definition of the situation" is both contingent and social. By using this theoretical approach to frame contemporary communication technologies, such as asynchronous forums, we may improve our understanding of how individuals and institutions "do" education.

Historically, learning in the modern era was a passive activity (Palloff & Pratt, 2001) where students attended geospatially "real" schools to learn objective facts, histories and skills necessary to participate in society. Today, knowledge-based economy (OEC, 1996) is redefining the purpose and focus of education specifically, and knowledge production, or epistemology, more broadly. In our new knowledge society, knowledge is no longer handed down but rather exists as an interaction between learner and environment which subsequently reconfigures both (Semple, 2000). In contrast with modernist science, which was resolved to operate under the constraints of the natural world, post-modern science and technology "is not concerned with discovering 'laws of nature', as it is [seeking] the reinvention of nature itself" (Holmes, Hughes, & Julian, 2007, p. 66). Contemporary educators, particularly in higher education, occupy social roles demanding flexibility and cultural awareness in addition to disciplinary and trans-disciplinary expertise.

"Revolutions" in communications and information technologies (Aronson, 2001) have fundamentally altered the structure of our global world economy and its social institutions. Educa-

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