

Interactions Online

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INTRODUCTION

Success in online courses depends on quality interactions (Li & Akins, 2005; Shovein, Huston, Fox, & Damazo, 2005; Vrasidas, 2002). Interaction is “a continually emerging process, as communication in its most inclusive sense” (Simpson & Galbo, 1986). Pena-Shaff, Altman, and Stephenson (2005) found that students who interact more in online classes tend to feel a greater amount of satisfaction and even engage more deeply in course content. In fact, recent studies have shown that the most efficient computer-mediated learning occurs when teachers and students assume a connected stance (Wegmann, 2006; Wegmann & McCauley, 2007), or one in which students and teachers participate in the following types of behaviors online: initiate personally meaningful questions about the text, wonder, or initiate unique topics for discussion.

The following reports on one study that analyzed students’ discussion board interactions, surveys of students’ perceptions, and e-mail interviews of selected participants. Following is a discussion of three areas of literature pertinent to the study: nature of interactions, computer-mediated communication, reading and writing theory.

BACKGROUND

Nature of Interactions

Mehan (1979) found that most discourse in face-to-face classrooms followed an Initiate, Respond, Evaluate, or IRE, pattern. Teachers mainly ask questions (initiate) which students answer (respond), after which teachers evaluate students’ responses (evaluate). This type of discourse is a perfectly acceptable pattern of interaction in some courses. However, some researchers found that this was not an optimum pattern for maximizing student learning (Cazden, 1988; Wells & Arauz, 2006). Instead, some researchers argue that more optimal interactions

are found in genuine discussion (Dillon, 1994), grand conversations (Eeds & Wells, 1989), Socratic questioning techniques (Hale, 2002), or interactions in which participants assume a connected stance (Wegmann & McCauley, 2007).

These more optimal approaches to conducting lessons are influenced by numerous factors, including Bakhtin’s notion of the dialogue that occurs in every communication event. According to Bakhtin (1986), a dialogic chain connects all utterances to other communications. The nature of one link in the chain influences all subsequent links. Asynchronous in nature, the chains of utterances online typically take place over time: one hour, day, week, month, or semester. Since computers may influence the nature of the dialogic chain, computer-mediated communication is another important field of research that informs this study.

Computer-Mediated Communication

Unlike face to face courses, in which students meet regularly for periods of time with a human instructor, online courses are mediated by a computer because students have choices about how to proceed through a course (i.e. when to log in, what to access when logged on, and what types of activities to engage in). Discourse sequences are mediated by a computer in online coursework, thus, online courses fall under the category of computer-mediated communication. The computer is seen as a gateway to information and participation in the course (Mondada, 2006).

Online students are not subject to immediate verbal or nonverbal feedback. In fact, Sutherland-Smith (2002) reported that students “perceive Web text reading as different from print text reading” (p. 664) because of the lack of immediate feedback. This “different-ness” also affects the chains of utterances (Bakhtin, 1986), as students have no immediate way to repair their comments or revise their ideas.

Hillman, Willis, and Gunawardena, (1994) have delineated four types of interactions that occur online:

1. teacher/learner
2. learner/learner
3. learner/content
4. learner/interface

The first three interactions are also found in face to face courses, but the last type of interaction shapes the other three in online course work. Learner/interface interaction describes the interaction students have with technology and is influenced by learner abilities, previous technology use and success, and comfort with the computer. These influences can help or hinder students' abilities to participate fully in online courses. All participation in the course is mediated by a computer as students read and write to participate. Thus, another area that informs this study is reading and writing theory.

Reading and Writing Theory

Learners who take online courses acquire, or take in, all of their course knowledge through decoding, or reading. Therefore, students are expected to metacognitively initiate their linguistic experiential reservoir (Rosenblatt, 1994), which is previous language and experiences, in order to make sense of the written text online. Reading is a transaction between a person and a text, meaning that each informs the other. This transaction results in an evocation (Rosenblatt, 1994), or unique understanding, that is different at each reading. Online learners assume a stance, or readiness to respond in a certain way, when reading online which shapes their evocation. Reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1994) posits that learners can assume a predominately efferent stance, which means that they are reading for the purpose of a later event (i.e. directions to a new location or questions at the end of a selection). On the other end of the stance spectrum is a predominately aesthetic stance, which focuses on during the reading event. The aesthetic stance is typically assumed during pleasure reading, and the focus is found during the reading event. (i.e. reading a novel or some other chosen work for pleasure, in which time becomes irrelevant.) A typical stance when reading online is a predominately efferent stance. However, motivation is often increased when reading with a predominately aesthetic stance. Thus, encouraging a predominately aesthetic stance can potentially motivate students during completion of coursework.

Another major portion of the online experience is encoding, or writing responses and reactions. Students may be asked to respond to questions posed by the instructor, as an informal assessment of their reading. Students may also be asked to interact with their peers on discussion boards or group work. This interaction is shaped by the ability to write clearly. While researchers have mainly studied writing from the perspective of student assessment and the writing process (Flower & Hayes, 1981; MacArthur, Graham, Fitzgerald, 2006), little research has been conducted on the types of writing that occur online during course work.

Computer-mediated communication, Reader response, and writing theory, however, do not completely describe students' learning online. A more complete picture may be described by a connected stance (Wegmann, 2007) where students often think more deeply and engage more fully with what they are reading, their peers, their teachers, and the computer. The term "connected" is appropriate in this instance because it evokes an interaction with technology. A connected stance may be contrasted to a contrived stance, in terms of what is actually occurring while reading and responding. A contrived stance is characterized by students who simply finish coursework, without much connection to the content or lessons. However, during a connected stance, students often engage more deeply with the text (both in reading and writing). For example, a connected stance is being enacted when students wonder (Townsend, 1993) or initiate new topics (Wegmann, 2007) during discussion board responses. The moves, or purposes for writing/responding, reveal what type of stance is being enacted.

INTERACTION PATTERNS IN ONE ONLINE COURSE

Historically, discourse analysts transcribed oral speech, coded moves, and tried to determine participants' purposes for speaking, noting common themes that emerge. In online courses, however, oral speech is absent, so researchers turn to the discussion boards or chat rooms to analyze online discourse (Burnette & Buerkle, 2004; Waltonen-Moore, Stuart, Newton, Oswald, & Varonis, 2006). Using discussion boards, researchers can analyze students' moves, or purposes for communicating, while attending to content. This study explores discussion boards and uses participant-

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