

Chapter 4

Participation in Online Distance Learning Environments: Proxy, Sign, or a Means to an End?

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ABSTRACT

Participation is actively encouraged and promoted in online distance learning environments because it is associated with effective learning behaviors and with overall learner satisfaction. Participation is easily observed and measured; indeed, it is often seen as “making visible” underlying behaviors and dynamics at both the individual and group level. The reality, however, is that the ease with which participation can be assessed is in stark contrast with the complexity that surrounds its role in the productive distance online learning environments. This chapter explores the multiplicity of meanings, definitions, and attributions associated with participation. It attempts to make sense of this complexity, to consider a broader framework that makes a connection between participation and learning outcomes, and to examine the ways in which individual learning styles and national culture assumptions impact and mediate student participation in online learning contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Participation has become a ubiquitous element in the assessment rubrics of online distance learning courses. There are two reasons for this – a good one and a bad one. The good reason is that participation is often, but not inevitably, the antecedent of effective learning behaviors – it can contribute to a growing sense of learner self-efficacy and empowerment. Participation is often a useful initiator and indicator of constructive dynamics

within the online learning environment. As such, it should be recognized, monitored, and encouraged through formative and summative assessment, even although participation in itself may only be a distal factor in positive learning outcomes.

But there is a bad reason for assessing participation and unfortunately the bad reason is frequently confused and misunderstood in ways that make it the favored choice. The bad reason is that participation is simply so easy to measure in online distance learning contexts. Most modern online

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platforms will automatically generate a plethora of participation statistics – the number of posts contributed to conference discussions, the total and average word counts associated with these contributions, the period of time that the learner was logged into discussion sites, and more. All of these statistics are easily derived and provide what can be understood as objective, quantitatively, and reliable measures of participation. Unfortunately, these measures ignore – and certainly do not assess – the quality, complexity, and consequences of online participation. Indeed, many online practitioners have come to acknowledge that although the number of comments posted and the length of discussion threads “may be common intuitive ways used by instructors to judge the ‘health’ of their discussion forums, it is far from clear... that they are useful measures to judge the quality of the learning taking place there” (Mazzolini & Maddison 2003, p. 252).

The measurement, interpretation, and implications of online participation are always tenuous; however, participation becomes even more challenging when we consider these parameters with the actual behavior and expectations of individual learners. The instructor’s interpretation of participation may be at variance with the assumptions and behaviors of the learners who have actually participated, or who have been judged not to have participated. The learning styles of students, for example, may not favor social engagement and collaboration. The national and ethnic cultures of the learners involved may also not place a positive value on individualism, self-expression, and knowledge sharing – elements that are generally expected by instructors and which are linked with participatory behavior (Ardichvili, Maurer, Li, Wentling, & Stuedemann, 2006; Butler & Pinto-Zipp, 2006; Coldwell, Craig, Paterson, & Mustard, 2008; Zapalska & Brozik, 2006).

This chapter explores participation in online learning environments. It considers the ways in

which participation might – or might not – serve to identify and promote successful learning outcomes. The first section provides background by examining the role of participation in different learning contexts, especially the context in which distance learning and online distance learning take place. This examination briefly reviews the understanding of participation in distance learning from a historical (and evolving) perspective. The second section explores the different meanings attached to “participation.” It considers whether participation *per se* is of value, or whether it is regarded as a sign of, or as a proxy for, more distance but less easily determined behaviors that advance effective knowledge creation. This exploration invites an examination of participation and numerous related constructs such as social presence, learner-instructor and learner-learner interaction, engagement with content, communities of inquiry, and social and constructivist pedagogies. This section also considers participation from both instructor and learner perspectives, exploring the associated assumptions and anticipated end-results. This analysis of assumptions about, and requirements for, participation is conducted through the specific prisms of cultural norms and individual learning styles.

The third section reviews the challenges and opportunities presented by participation in online learning environments. It provides suggestions and recommendations that might contribute to understanding participation in more considered, flexible, and beneficial ways. The fourth section picks up on the issues proposed and suggests further research to provide a more comprehensive appreciation of the role that participation might play in online distance learning environments. Finally, the chapter sets out a concluding section that summarizes the main themes presented and suggests ways forward for instructional designers, online instructors, and learners involved in distance learning.

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