Chapter 36
Portraits of the Activity Systems of International Higher Education Students in Online Learning

Elizabeth Murphy
Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada

María A. Rodríguez-Manzanares
Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents findings of a study of the activity systems of seven international students enrolled in online learning at Memorial University of Newfoundland, in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. The seven students were interviewed using questions focused around the components of an activity system. Data were analyzed using a coding protocol designed for the study and based on Activity Theory. Findings are presented as seven individual portraits of the activity system of students. Each portrait is summarized according to the following components: subject, object, tools, norms, community, division of labour, outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter presented results of a survey of 87 higher education international students from Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada, about their academic and non-academic uses of computers and the Internet. This chapter presents a second study of higher education international students from the same institution but in relation to online learning. This context allowed us to focus on students' use of technology specifically for learning. Instead of a survey as in the last study, this second study relied on interviews. Instead of focusing on 87 students, this study was limited to a more in-depth analysis of seven students. This chapter presents the findings while the subsequent chapters (9-10) present further analysis of the findings.

Approximately 350 undergraduate and graduate courses were being offered online at Memorial University of Newfoundland when the study was undertaken. The university had also been experiencing a significant increase in online enrollments (Griffin, 2008). In the year 2009, annual online learning registrations totalled over 17,000 (Director's Message, n.d.). It would not be possible to ascertain how these registration figures compare with those from other Canadian universities or provinces. With very few exceptions, such as a Quebec report (Saucier, 2011), to date, data are generally not available in Canada on online learning enrollments or on those related to other distance learning modes, such as correspondence distance education (Bates, 2011).

The learning management system used for online courses at Memorial University of Newfoundland was Desire2Learn (D2L). Delivery was primarily text-based asynchronous (delayed time), except for the fact that, within a course, instructors could include a chat tool which was available in the system. An online collaborative environment for synchronous (real-time) interaction using voice, Elluminate *Live*, was also available for online instructors if they wished to avail of that type of communication. It had been introduced in the academic year 2004-2005 (Murphy & Ciszewska-Carr, 2007).

We begin with an overview of how we conducted the study including a description of procedures for recruitment and selection of participants, the interview questions and procedures, data analysis, development of the coding protocol, procedures for member checking, and reporting of portraits. We present the portraits in random order and using the pseudonyms of: Khalid, Rajesh, Dina, John, Albert, Ariene, and Vincent. We follow each student's portrait with a table summarizing their activity system in online learning.

METHODS

Recruitment and Selection of Participants

Participating students needed to be non-native speakers (NNSs) of English and have completed one or more online courses taken for credit as part of the requirements for completion of their university degree. Recruitment strategies involved posting and e-mailing flyers throughout the university as well as brief visits to English as a second language classes to present the study to potential participants. Participation incentives included a small gift package containing items such as a USB drive. The names of participating students were also included in a draw for three iPods.

Not all students who responded to the call for participation were included in the study. Some were not eligible to participate because they had taken correspondence distance courses that were not online, or they had completed online modules that were not part of a credit course, such as a module on ethics that the university required for all students conducting research with human participants. Other students were not included because they initially expressed interest in participating but did not provide consent to participate nor did they follow up, either by e-mail, telephone, or in person, to the initial recruitment e-mails.

Sampling was consistent with Sarantakos's (2005) description of non-probability sampling whereby size is not determined statistically and small samples are used that can be selected before and during the research. We initially recruited eight participants from two different campuses of the university but

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