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Chapter XIII

Empowering Learners to Interact Effectively in Asynchronous Discussion Activities

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Abstract

The encouragement of learner-to-learner interaction in asynchronous discussions can be achieved by providing learner support in the early stages of course delivery. This not only smoothes the transition to e-learning but also contributes to knowledge construction and enhancement of learning outcomes. In this chapter, the author describes improvements to orientation activities that enabled learners to work collaboratively in online groups. The activities are closely aligned with Salmon's five-stage model and illustrate the dynamics of online learning in groups. Research conducted by the author examining the effectiveness of the orientation activities has led to identification of key issues and practical suggestions that will assist the readers of the chapter to develop approaches to learner support in their own context.

Introduction

In an increasingly resource-stretched higher education environment, the cornerstone for successful e-learning is promoting learner-to-learner interaction. Effective interaction requires not only the careful design of e-learning activities, but more importantly, the empowerment of the learner to engage collaboratively with others.

Making the transition to e-learning requires a clear understanding of the notion of interaction in learning programs, which Moore (1989) described as occurring in three ways: learner-to-content, learner-to-instructor, and learner-to-learner. It is this last type of interaction between one learner and another, individually or in groups, and with or without the presence of an instructor that has become an important dimension in e-learning because it facilitates collaboration and deeper learning (Anderson, 2003).

Learner-to-learner interaction may occur both synchronously (in real time) and asynchronously (over time). Asynchronous discussion is more commonly used as it allows flexibility for learners who are able to control when and where they post and reply to messages in a discussion forum. A collaborative learning environment is created when learners interact by negotiating, debating, reviewing, and reflecting upon existing knowledge and are able to build a deeper understanding of the course content (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Geer, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). This differs from face-to-face discussions because the learner is able to consider their responses more carefully and make more in-depth contributions; consequentially, the learner feels freer and less intimidated.

This chapter will lead the reader through an action research based cycle of improvements I have made when developing orientation activities that enable learners to achieve knowledge construction by participation in asynchronous discussions. The improvements in both the design and delivery of the learning program draw heavily on research evidence describing interaction in online discussions. This combined with my research provides practical suggestions to assist the reader to develop strategies for learner support in their own context.

Key aspects identified are:

- Designing tasks that encourage learner interaction.
- Clarifying instructor and learner expectations related to time, interaction, and feedback.
- Encouraging learner participation and the learner's relationship to assessment and learning outcomes.
- Facilitating online group dynamics and development of collaborative groups.

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