Chapter 1

Contextualizing Social Presence and Learner Identity Through the Lens of Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance

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ABSTRACT

Online education has become a ubiquitous and convenient method by which to complete courses at institutions of higher education across the globe. To achieve this level of parity between course delivery methods (online or face-to-face), the instructor or course designer must understand the complex relationship between the technology and instructional design theories being leveraged in these contexts. Within the context of this chapter, these barriers manifest themselves within Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance, a theory which states that the transactional distance between stakeholders (whether it is instructor-learner or learner-learner communication) has the potential to obstruct the path for comprehending the information being presented as well as influencing the level of rapport between students. This chapter examines the obstacles that are present because of Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance and the influence that social presence has on learners in online courses from the perspective of student satisfaction and positive learning outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Contextualizing the Barriers That Exist in Online Learning

The presence of online education with the realm of higher education has altered the methods by which individual students of any level (undergraduate or graduate) can access and participate in a college level education. It has revolutionized the concept of not only how individuals learn, it has replaced the physical realm of the classroom with virtual learning environments such as learning management systems and

communication technologies that offer access to course materials at any time of the day. This relationship of technology and instructional design practices seek to recreate the learning experience virtually that occurs in traditional face-to-face learning environments. Beetham and Sharpe (2013) assert that this relationship has resulted in a "context" for both learning and instruction as we continue to educate individual learners throughout the twenty-first century (p.4).

This context requires that instructional designers and instructors not fall into the normal behavior of merely continuing traditional face-to-face instructional practices online with minimal enhancements afforded by technology (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013). The inherent issue with attempting to replicate the experience of traditional learners virtually is how to determine the necessary methods/strategies to facilitate such behaviors in online learning environments. Namely, Moore (1993) articulated in his seminal theory that geographic distance between learner and instructor creates a "psychological and communication" gap that must be overcome as a "space of potential misunderstanding" that exists between the primary stakeholders (p. 22). Thus, it becomes imperative to find methods and instructional theories by which it is possible to minimize both the geographic distance and the potential misunderstandings that might occur online between the instructor and their learners.

Contextually, Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance offers a lens by which to assess the "pedagogical needs of learners" and "promote critical thinking via dialogue" among these primary stakeholders (Koslow & Pina, 2015 p.63). This reaffirms that the solution to solving these potential barriers defined by Moore's theory is not merely the inclusion of dialogue, but rather, it requires an understanding of the relationship between interaction and the learning theories present to create an authentic learning experience online. If one considers the quote from Koslow and Pina, it means that the structure of the course must be perceived by the learner as an essential element to promote interaction among their peers while also reducing the sense of isolation that one might feel when attending courses online. Moreover, it also asserts that the context established by Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance requires that the instructor fully consider the variables present in their online courses rather than merely applying traditional instructional strategies in an environment where their effectiveness might be limited or rendered ineffective.

This chapter seeks to examine how an instructor can overcome the spatial separation and communications gap with their students through the cultivation of social presence in their online courses. In particular, there will be a discussion of Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance as the context that will determine the role that social presence will assume in online courses and how technology is leveraged to create learner identity as well as rapport among participating stakeholders. This discussion of social presence will then turn to its usage in developing an engaging academic experience through the utilization of learning and pedagogical elements, which influence the effectiveness of the learning outcomes and student satisfaction in online courses. Ultimately, it is through an understanding of the medium and the potential barriers in online education that will result in an innovative approach that relies heavily on social presence and technology to create a rich and engaging learning experience online.

MOORE'S THEORY OF TRANSACTIONAL DISTANCE, A LENS INTO THE PURPOSE OF SOCIABILITY IN ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS

To fully understand the concept of Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance, one must return to a time that preceded the very concept of online learning. The conceptual and theoretical underpinning for

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