Chapter 13
Building Community in Online Learning Environments:
Strategies for High School Teachers

Jason Anthony Singh
University of Toronto, Canada

ABSTRACT

This self-study assesses the impact on classroom communities using distance learning activities. Five activities used in the author's high school science classes during the COVID-19 pandemic are analyzed based on a bilateral framework interweaving transactional distance (student-teacher interactions) and social interaction (student-student interaction). A reflective narration of activity development leads to a discussion of the effects of activity design on student-teacher and student-student interactions. The intersection between these interactions serves as a foundation for analyzing their impact on the classroom community. A predominant theme is the psychological separation students face when learning remotely and how activity design can intensify or diminish this perceived detachment. This chapter provides an exemplar for other educators to consider how transactional distance and social interaction play a role in the development of their own classroom communities.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers have been called upon to pivot in these unprecedented times amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted the learning of nearly 1.5 billion students worldwide in March 2020 and continues to prevent schools from providing uninterrupted in-person learning (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020). With the uncertainty and mixed messaging that spread around the world, many teachers were thrust into distance learning without sufficient professional development. In addition to the stressors of personal health, family health and safety, social distancing, and mask wearing, teachers faced the additional challenge of bringing students together in an unfamiliar environment and engaging them in learning (Darling-Hammond, 2020). While many teachers have been able to create

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7222-1.ch013

Copyright © 2021, IGI Global. Copying or distributing in print or electronic forms without written permission of IGI Global is prohibited.

these environments for their students, this chapter helps teachers begin or continue to move beyond the "physical" creation of an online learning environment to the creation of a classroom community.

In this chapter, the author describes a range of activities successfully facilitated at a private high school in Toronto, Canada. The author uses these activities to explore key strategies for educational practitioners to build a sense of community within a distance learning model, regardless of the geographical location of their students. Readers will recognize distance learning as a psychological separation between the learner and instructor, rather than solely a spatial separation (Moore, 2018). This separation, termed transactional distance, is "a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner" (Moore, 1997, p. 22). The acknowledgement of transactional distance allows educators to utilize differentiated instruction to promote the well-being and academic success of their students by creating a positive classroom community. Moreover, readers will learn that an increase in social interaction does not necessarily lead to a decrease in transactional distance. This chapter is guided by the following key questions:

1. How do the levels of transactional distance between learners and their teacher and social interaction between learners and their peers vary between distance learning activities?
2. How do varying levels of transactional distance and social interaction assist teachers in building a sense of community within a distance learning model?

The present analysis benefits high school teachers, middle school teachers, teacher researchers, and educational designers and developers who are creating and facilitating distance learning environments across a range of subjects. Moreover, teachers using any learning management system (LMS) can implement these activities, as they are sufficiently broad in scope to be transferable to a wide range of contexts. Finally, readers may also consider their own pedagogy through the lens of transactional distance, allowing them to construct activities that better support student well-being and academic performance in distance learning environments.

This chapter begins with a review of the literature on building classroom community and the distance learning model. Next, the author conceptualizes transactional distance as a framework to analyze a narrative of five activities personally used in a distance learning environment created due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequently, an analysis integrating current research considers the five activities based on how students engage with each other, how students engage with the teacher, and the intersection between social interaction and transactional distance towards the development of the classroom community. After reflecting on the concerns and limitations of this chapter, the closing remarks suggest directions for future examination of the use of transactional distance and social interaction in the design of distance learning activities to solidify this chapter's position in the literature.

BACKGROUND

When accounting for both student autonomy (Weiss & Belland, 2018) and e-learning context (Benson & Samarawickrema, 2009), online learning activities can build community in ways that mirror in-person learning. Earlier work by Rovai (2001) identifies four tenants that underlie the manifestation of classroom community:

17 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:
www.igi-global.com/chapter/building-community-in-online-learning-environments/284528

Related Content

A Constructivist Desktop Virtual Reality-Based Approach to Learning in a Higher Education Institution
Serpil Meri-Yilan (2019). *Emerging Technologies in Virtual Learning Environments (pp. 258-283).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/a-constructivist-desktop-virtual-reality-based-approach-to-learning-in-a-higher-education-institution/230851

Students' Performance Prediction in Higher Education Using Multi-Agent Framework-Based Distributed Data Mining Approach: A Review
M. Nazir, A. Noraziahand M. Rahmah (2023). *International Journal of Virtual and Personal Learning Environments (pp. 1-19).*
www.irma-international.org/article/students-performance-prediction-in-higher-education-using-multi-agent-framework-based-distributed-data-mining-approach/328772

Designing Virtual Collaborations in Case-Based Science Learning: Using Google Slides, Padlet, and FlipGrid
Fatemeh Mardi, Elizabeth Walsh-Rockand Phyllis Balcerzak (2021). *Handbook of Research on Transforming Teachers' Online Pedagogical Reasoning for Engaging K-12 Students in Virtual Learning (pp. 379-401).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/designing-virtual-collaborations-in-case-based-science-learning/284535

Designing for Learning in Narrative Multimedia Environments
Lisa Gjedde (2005). *Interactive Multimedia in Education and Training (pp. 101-112).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/designing-learning-narrative-multimedia-environments/24538

Managing Virtual Schools: The Canadian Experience
Margaret Haugheyand William Muirhead (2004). *Development and Management of Virtual Schools: Issues and Trends (pp. 50-68).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/managing-virtual-schools/8304