

## Chapter 8

# Online Interaction Styles: Adapting to Active Interaction Styles

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### ABSTRACT

*Past studies indicate that students demonstrate different online interaction styles, which consist of the ways or habits students acquire knowledge from computer-mediated discussions (Sutton, 2001). Such interaction styles include the active interaction style (Beaudion, 2002), the vicarious interaction style (Sutton, 2001), and the mixed or balanced-interaction style. The purposes of this chapter are to: (1) examine relative studies on students' online interaction styles; (2) propose a hypothesis that students' online interaction styles can change during the course of computer-mediated discussion; (3) conduct a case study on students' online interaction styles to test the hypothesis. This chapter reviews current issues related to students' online interaction styles. It offers practical suggestions on the design of online learning environments, instructor's role in online courses, and educational tools to facilitate students in adapting to more active interaction styles in computer-mediated learning environments.*

### INTRODUCTION

Online and distance learning has exploded exponentially around the globe. In North America, there are fully online universities (e.g. the University of Phoenix and Capella University) and degrees offered completely online at Drexel University

Online and Athabasca University. Similarly, in Asia, there are the Open University of Malaysia and India's Indira Gandhi National Open University. Although the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies such as MySpace and Blogger greatly facilitates this wave of online and distance learning, questions about pedagogical value and methods of effectively integrating such technologies have also emerged

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(Bonk, 2009). In addition, due to access and type of security issues involved (Evers, 2006), online instructors have yet to find a way to fully adopt these technologies. Therefore, it is not surprising that asynchronous online discussions, which are usually mediated or assisted by computers, is still a common pedagogical practice in online courses (McLoughlin & Luca, 2000; Swan, Schenker, Arnold, & Kuo, 2007). As for asynchronous online discussions, research shows that when they are appropriately implemented, asynchronous computer-mediated discussions can increase knowledge and understanding of course materials (Brown, Smyth, & Mainka, 2006; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001).

In asynchronous computer-mediated discussions, students can discuss and reflect on course materials and post their ideas and thoughts within a course management system or tool, such as Moodle or Blackboard. Students are also usually required to respond to their peers' postings. During such discussions, students display different online interaction styles, which are defined as the ways or habits students acquire knowledge from the discussions (Sutton, 2001). For instance, some students are constantly participating or posting more than the course requires, which allows them to be categorized, as Sutton defines, as active interaction style learners (Sutton, 2001). Some are actively observing and processing both sides of the interaction from others (peers and the instructor) without direct participation in the discussions and are known as vicarious interaction style learners (Sutton, 2001). Furthermore, according to the authors' online teaching and discussion facilitation experiences, another group of learners also exists, who may not fixed in the active or passive mode, whom we refer to as the mixed or balanced-interaction style learners. For students categorized within the mixed or balanced-interaction style, their levels of effort in computer-mediated discussions are approximately equal to the minimum amount of postings required by a course.

## ISSUES AND PROBLEMS RELATED TO ONLINE INTERACTION STYLES

### Online Interaction Styles

Because of different online interaction styles, students utilize different learning processes or manners of learning in computer-mediated discussions. The "manner in which information is learned" affects learning transfer, which is the ability to apply learning to new situations (Bransford & Schwartz, 1999, p. 64). Thus, students' online interaction styles in asynchronous computer-mediated discussions not only reflect students' participation behaviors, but can also affect students' learning and learning transfer.

The active interaction style involves students continuously participating and responding to discussion questions and their peers' postings, generally more than they are required to. The constant participation and responses may reflect students' active encoding and decoding of course materials and others' ideas. In fact, educational researchers argue that active student participation and interaction is critical to the success of online learning (Moallem, 2003; Spitzer, 2001; Zirkin & Sumler, 1995). In a socially constructed knowledge learning environment such as asynchronous computer-mediated discussions, students need to be actively participating to construct their own learning (Anderson, 2008).

Vicarious interaction style, which involves actively observing and processing both sides of the interaction and discussions among other participants, benefits from vicarious learning characteristics (Sutton, 2000) such as learning from observing others (Bandura, 1986) and reading postings (Lee, Dineen, McKendree, & Mayes, 1999). Vicarious learning has two phases: the acquisition phase and the performance phase (Masia & Chase, 1997). Masia and Chase (1997), in their description of the phases, point out that there is often a gap in terms of time between the two phases. The completion of the acquisition

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