

Chapter 17

Case Study of the CUForum @ CUHK

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In contrast to the formal school setting where learning is often linear, structured and controlled (be it online or face-to-face), for the 'net generation,' (Google, MySpace, MSN, YouTube and Yahoo) learning is often incidental and a sense of 'fun' is frequently of great importance. Such students' learning is often non-linear, unstructured and explained well by the tenets of Anderson's theory of online learning. This research discusses the benefits of fostering non-linearity in an online learning environment. A case study of an online business communication course at a university in Hong Kong is used to illustrate the importance of non-linear online learning by demonstrating how participants in this course adopted learning approaches that are consistent with, and a reflection of, the theory of online learning. Qualitative data from complete sets of online communication (including focus group interviews) collected over a one-semester, tertiary level course conducted at a university in Hong Kong are analyzed. The findings show that Chinese-speaking learners' online interactions, categorized into three broad areas (cognitive, affective and social), demonstrate that interactivity is a key feature of an online learning environment. Its nature is exposed and discussed, not least the finding that for the participants in this study, learning was incidental and a sense of 'fun' was important. The study suggests ways in which online theory can contribute to, as well as help in, understanding this phenomenon and makes recommendations for future research.

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BACKGROUND

Drawing from more than ten years experience in using Web-based courses at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), the author aims to explore the application of the CUForum (a course management platform, similar to WebCT and Noodle, and developed by the Information Technology Services Centre (ITSC) at CUHK in enhancing *interactivity* in an online learning environment. Online learning, according to Anderson (2004), is defined as

the use of the Internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructors, and other learners; and to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience (p.5).

A one-semester, thirteen week (Sept. – Dec. 2004) online business communication course for 3rd. year students studying in the Faculty of Business Administration in a tertiary-level institution in Hong Kong is used here as the database for this study. This course is offered for final year students and consists of advanced levels of business communication, namely, writing proposals and case studies, giving presentations, writing business-related documents such as resumes, cover letters, memos and emails. In addition, this course prepares the students to enter the workforce by showing them job search techniques and interview skills. All online correspondence on the CUForum is done in English, with the specific objective of improving the students' English language skills. This Web-based course is conducted both in a computer lab (with every student having access to a computer) and outside of the classroom through a high speed Internet connection called WiFi (available 24 hours/day, 7 days a week). The course plan stipulates that 10% of the final grade is accorded to interaction on the CUForum (i.e. the grade is based on the quality and quantity of the

student messages posted and replied to). For the majority of the students in this study, aged between 19 – 23 years old, Cantonese is a mother tongue (90%) and the remainder has Putonghua as their mother tongue (10%). This particular course was chosen at random from a wide range of courses that use online learning as being a representative sample of a specific business communication course using the CUForum.

This investigation focuses on the concept of *interactivity* and considers how users interact with computers in a Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning environment (CSCL) to promote learning (Slavin, 1990; Cooper, 1992; Lai, 1993; Nardi, 1996; Johnson & Johnson 1998; Kekkonen-Moneta and Moneta 2001; Phelps and Ellis 2003; Roskams, 1998; McConnell, 2000; Napierkowski, 2001; Sheard and Markham, 2005; Tu and McIsaac 2002). Walther (1996), states that *interactivity* is the key to communication, and *the concept of interactivity is the key to online communication* (Author's italics). If there is no interaction in an online environment between the participants (student/student, teacher/student), then the CUForum (the online platform under study) remains an empty shell.

In order to study online interactions on the CUForum (student /teacher messages) and to understand the processes that enhance learning, an in-depth analysis using NVivo V.1.3 of the Messages section was conducted. The Messages section was chosen for its rich text-based data (transcribed in over 600 pages of text) and created by the participants (students and teachers) during a one-semester, 13-week business communication course (Sept. – Dec. 2004).

The nature of *interactivity* in a virtual context may or may not differ substantially and qualitatively from that in a non-virtual world, and this needs to be explored further, together with its impact on learning. For example, the lack of sensory stimulation and face-to-face meetings in online learning, the opportunity for private and public messages, the risk of 'flaming' (defined as

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