

Chapter 2.3

Preparing Online Instructors: Beyond Using the Technology

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses methods for supporting the instructor in the development of strong learner-learner interactions. In this chapter, we present a brief overview of the importance of social learning theories and existing research that support learner-learner interaction as an important aspect of learning. Next, we discuss the multiple factors, and their complex interaction on the instructor's ability to support learner-learner interaction. Additionally, we report and discuss findings from a qualitative study examining the use of an ecological assessment tool to evaluate an online course's ability to support learner-learner interaction. The chapter concludes with suggestions for improved approaches to faculty development to support learner-learner interaction.

INTRODUCTION

As the number of learners engaging in online education increases, a growing body of literature is

developing to recommend best practices for instructors. As online education was developing, the focus for instructors was on how to use the technology to transition traditional courses to the online format. Increasingly, best practices for instructors of online courses focus on sets of recommendations to enhance learner outcomes. Typically, these recommendations are oriented to a particular aspect of interaction based on Moore's (1989) extended framework to include learner-instructor, learner-learner, learner-content, and learner-interface interactions.

Any educational experience, to include online learning, seeks to achieve defined learning outcomes, and does so largely through adopting instructional models based on theories of learning integrated with the unique demands of the content and intended audience. However, online instructors and learners operate within a complex environment in which many aspects can have a direct impact on the instructor's ability to facilitate learner-learner interactions. Although specific recommendations are important, in that they provide guidance to direct the actions of an instructor based on research, we know that distance education programs vary a great deal in content, delivery methods, and learner characteristics (Zhao, Lei, Yan, Lai, & Tan, 2005).

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By examining these variables in context, we may incorporate an integrated approach to evaluating the learning context as a fundamental part of faculty development, so that the instructor can make appropriate decisions about how to increase learner-learner interaction (Roblyer & Wiencke, 2003; Zhao et al., 2005).

Objectives of the Chapter

- Provide a brief overview of the importance of social learning theories and existing research that support learner-learner interaction as an important aspect of learning.
- Discuss the multiple factors and their complex interaction on the instructor's ability to support learner-learner interaction.
- Report and discuss findings from a qualitative study examining the use of an ecological assessment tool to evaluate an online course's ability to support learner-learner interaction.
- Suggest improved approaches to faculty development to support learner-learner interaction.

BACKGROUND

Many current theories of adult learning maintain that knowledge is actively constructed through interactions with other learners. Such theories contend that an important element in the learning process is the level and quality of interaction that occurs within a learning community (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Moore, 1989). Through discourse, learners create meanings and understandings, critically reflect on stated assumptions, and negotiate new learning through consensus (Mezirow, 1998). These concepts of learning are grounded in social learning theory, which contends that cognitive processes experienced and observed in social settings are then internalized by individuals (Bandura, 1977; Glaser, 1990). Social

learning occurs when a group exposes a learner to new understandings that challenge, extend, and complement their current conceptualizations (Glaser, 1990). Examples of instructional models based on social learning theories include collaborative learning (Slavin, 1991) and reciprocal teaching (Brown & Palinscar, 1989). A key requirement to support learning, according to such models, is a high level of learner-learner interaction within the instructional environment.

At the same time, an increasing number of adult learners are turning to online institutions of higher education (IHE) for advanced degrees and continued professional development. Over 2.5 million people engaged in some form of online learning in the last few years (U.S. Distance Learning Association, 2004). Recent meta-analyses on the effectiveness of distance, as compared with face-to-face education, have confirmed what has been called the “no significant difference” finding (Zhao et al., 2005). This finding implies that when other variables—such as the quality of instructor, content materials, and course design—are held constant, online learning can be as effective as face-to-face education. Despite this finding, there has long been recognition that online learning is subject to one significant, potential shortcoming: the lack of face-to-face interaction, “real-time” dialogue, and opportunities for discussion, which may limit the development of true learning communities.

To that end, significant effort has been invested in researching the role of interaction in the online environment. Consistent with social theories of learning and research on interactive learning, research in online learning yields evidence that increased interaction is associated with improved learner outcomes and overall satisfaction (Fulford & Zhang, 1993; Hillman, Willis, & Gunawardena, 1994). Students express concern and dissatisfaction when there is a lack of interaction with the instructor and other online students (LaRose & Whitten, 2000; Russo & Campbell, 2004). However, while many educators believe that the

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