

Chapter 28

Virtual Interactions in Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

Virtual interactions play an important role in distance electronic learning. This chapter suggests an evaluation tool of virtual interactions in electronic forums and reports two case studies carried out using this tool. The first case study involves two issues: examining the differences, regarding feedback types, between high and low participating preservice teachers in an electronic forum, and examining correlations between the different characteristics of the electronic forum exchanges. The second case study involves examining the strategies of a successful distance learning instructor in interacting with students. Qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to analyze the collected data. It was found that the two groups of preservice teachers were different regarding their use of some types of feedback and similar regarding the use of other types. Significant correlations were found between some characteristics of the forum exchanges. The successful instructor used different interaction strategies that depended on the educational situation described by the participants.

INTRODUCTION

Kearsley (2005) points that information processing theories and behavioral theories tend to emphasize the importance of feedback for learning. Meiers (2005) says that feedback improves learning, partly through encouragement and recognition of achievement. Beggs et al. (2005) say that “providing undergraduates with sufficient feedback soon after they submit their work for assessment

is an important element in supporting them to become reflective and independent learners”. This importance of feedback is emphasized in the case of asynchronous web-based learning, where feedback is an important implication of the discussions taking place in electronic learning environments. Radojevic (2003) says that discussions within an electronic forum materialize and demonstrate the virtual presence of learners in the virtual classroom, while Wu and Hiltz (2003)

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describe the electronic discussions as an element which plays an important role in learning that occurs in the distance learning courses. Further, Bouhnik and Marcus (2006) point at interaction as a dimension of electronic learning that can be utilized to maximize the positive and minimize the negative results of the students' learning. dos Reis and Martins (2008) say that interactions in the forums encourages the emergence of different perspectives, and thus facilitates diversified contributions to the resolution of problems which is enabled by the exchange of experiences and the debate of ideas.

Regarding the use of interactions in the classroom, Enomoto and Tabata (2000) reported that interaction helped students build a community of equals, where the interaction included supporting, complimenting, reinforcing and responding to each other. Enomoto and Tabata (*ibid*) pointed at interaction as a component of a distance learning course which helped transform a teacher-dominated course into a student directed, peer learning one. Laguardia, Machado and Coutinho (2009) said that students looked at interaction as a factor of virtual learning which supports the constructing of knowledge in discussion forums. Casarotti, Filipponi, Pieti, and Sartori (2002) considered the possibility of interaction during the lesson as a basic factor for the success of a distance course. They added that such possibility could raise among learners a greater degree of attention, interest, participation, concentration, satisfaction and perceived efficacy.

Virtual interactions are a distance learning component that represents learning social and cognitive aspects (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001; Oren, Mioduser & Nachmias, 2002). This makes it essential to examine interactions in electronic forums which are part of distance learning courses to evaluate and analyze the social and cognitive presence of the learning that takes place within the distance learning courses. One way to examine interactions is to look at the function of exchanges in the electronic forum.

In this article I suggest a tool for facilitating this examination; based on the function of exchanges, and use the tool to analyze students' interactions in one electronic forum, a successful teacher's interaction in another electronic forum, and the relations that exist between the different characteristics of the students' interactions in the first electronic forum.

BACKGROUND

Some education researchers attempted to characterize educational feedback. Hounsell (2004), in a workshop on 'reinventing feedback in the contemporary university' suggests the following key functions for feedback: (1) evaluating progress, performance or achievement, (2) encouraging and supporting, and (3) instilling a grasp of high-quality work and how it might be achieved. Draper (2005) describes the following types of feedback: (1) a mark or grade or success/fail classification of outcome. This type of feedback shows if there is a difference between the actual performance and the desired performance, but does not point at what the difference consists of, (2) the right answer without explaining why it is correct, (3) a surface explanation of the right answer, (4) a detailed explanation of what makes the right answer correct, and (5) an explanation of what is wrong about the learner's answer. At the 'Teaching for Learning' website of the Flinders University we find the following types of Feedback: (1) Informal feedback through worked examples (e.g. verbal feedback in class, personal consultation), (2) Formal feedback as in writing commentary, (3) Direct feedback to individual preservice teachers, (4) Indirect feedback to whole class, (5) Formative feedback given during the run of a topic, and (6) Summative feedback given at the end of a topic. Schitai (1998) argues that feedback has to be tailored according to specific mistakes and must attempt to analyze the learners' thinking process. Schitai

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