

Chapter 9

Online Interaction Between On-Campus and Distance Students: Learners' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses postgraduate students' perspectives toward online interaction between on-campus and distance students through online collaboration tools such as online discussion boards and Wikis. Data were collected from eight interview participants and 29 written survey respondents. Seven interrelated categories capturing the main features of on-campus students' perspectives were generated from the data using a sequential mixed method approach, namely, a quantitative survey approach both preceded and followed by qualitative interviews. Among these categories, on-campus students' "unwillingness" to participate in online interaction with their distance peers emerged as the core phenomenon. Drawing on the analysis of these data, this article identifies the major impediments to active online interaction and collaboration and puts forward three recommendations for promoting more frequent interaction between distance and on-campus students.

INTRODUCTION

Recent advancements in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have fundamentally transformed the nature of interaction at a distance. Modern higher education seems to have

reaped more benefits from these advancements than other sectors as an increasing number of students and educational programs have adopted ICT to facilitate learning (Williams & Fardon, 2007; Woo, Gosper, McNeill, Preston, Green, & Phillips, 2008). In particular, Web 2.0 tools such

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as discussion boards, Wikis and blogs are fast becoming an indispensable means of interaction and collaboration in higher education today. Existing research has established the pedagogical values of these tools in supporting more interactive and collaborative learning environments (O'Reilly, 2005), providing feedback in a timely manner, encouraging students' social interaction (Chu, Hwang, Tsai, & Chen, 2009) and facilitating students' active participation in learning (Underwood et al., 2009). As more flexibility and more equal options and opportunities are being provided for both on-campus and distance students through advanced technologies, the term 'distance education' has almost been replaced by 'online education'. As a result, the boundary between on-campus and distance learning is blurring and widely overlapping (Spector, 2009). However, little appears to be known with regard to the use of Web 2.0 tools in facilitating interaction and collaboration between these on-campus and distance students. The current research will bridge this gap by investigating this issue from students' perspective.

First, the importance of interaction and studies on online interaction and distance education will be reviewed to provide a theoretical framework and a backdrop for this study. This will then be followed by an outline of the methodological approach of this study with regard to its procedures, participants and data collection and analysis. We present a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data collected from eight interview participants and 29 survey respondents in relation to their perceptions of the interaction between on-campus and distance students. Drawing on this analysis, the impediments to active interaction between the two groups of students will be identified and recommendations for promoting such interaction will be proposed. We will then briefly discuss the significance and limitations of this study in the concluding section.

Review of Studies on Interaction and Online Interaction

Interaction is widely regarded as the fundamental tenant of the constructivist approach to learning (Piaget, 1950, 1967; Vygotsky, 1978) since it is through interaction that learning takes place and human beings construct their own reasonable common sense (Gass, 1997; Williams & Burden, 1997). Within the realm of constructivism, two most influential theorists advocate interaction from different angles. On one hand, Jean Piaget emphasises "peer interaction", in which students' power and their cognitive levels are in equilibrium (Piaget, as cited in Brown, Metz, & Campione, 1996). Studies on the cognitive constructivism have identified two key principles of learning, that is, learning is an active process in which students must be given opportunities to construct their knowledge through active involvement, and learning should be authentic and real. On the other hand, Lev Vygotsky (1978) stresses the value of "scaffolding" which is a consequence of interacting with more competent and capable peers (Brown et al., 1996; Woolfolk, 2010). This approach emphasizes the social and collaborative dimension of learning. What is particularly important to the current study is the fact that existing research has established the significant role of technologies, especially Internet-based technologies in promoting both cognitive and social constructivist approaches to learning, especially to distance and online learning (Bernard, Abrami, Borokhovski, Wade, Tamim, & Surkes, 2009; Holden & Westfall, 2006). In particular, the role of interaction has been widely recognised in its importance in helping students to build a "sense of community" which is crucial in students' success in distance learning (e.g., Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Picciano, 2002). It has been argued that students' sense of community correlates to their motivation to learn (Rovai, 2002) and lowers a barrier to participate in online learning environments (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). In addition, social interaction plays

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