

A Discussion of Online Learning and Pedagogical Frameworks

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INTRODUCTION

Online learning has quickly emerged and consumed much of the research and discussion regarding distance education. But what is it about online learning that makes it different from other forms of distance education (i.e., print-, audio/radio-, or video/television-based)? Will it still be the “star of the show” in the next ten years? In the course of a discussion relating to the evolution of online learning through the lens of prominent learning theories, we will assert that online education has challenged pedagogical norms. By emphasizing the strong points of online learning as they relate to particular learning theories, we will illustrate how online education has solidified its place as a major force in enhancing the learning experience.

BACKGROUND

Distance education can be traced back to the 1700’s with print-based correspondence. During the 20th century, instructional radio and television became prominent. Combining both print and non-print delivery formats, the United Kingdom established Open University in 1969 (Mehrota, Hollister & McGahey, 2001). One of the first online courses offered was in 1981 at Western Behavioral Sciences in La Jolla, California.

Currently, with the increasing popularity of online courses, a significant number of university administrators have begun to look past the traditional perspective of brick buildings and are considering how to become major contributors to the virtual campus. James and Gardner (1995) describe (as depicted in Figure 1) the evolution of distance learning as: (a) Generation One: Correspondence study,

(b) Generation Two: Audio/video-conference, (c) Generation Three: Computers and the Internet and (d) Generation Four: The future.

As we make the transition to Generation Four, understanding distance education and the role of technology in the learning process establishes an appreciation of how the online environment can not only be utilized; but, can enhance the learning experience. Viewing the development of learning through theoretical lenses provides a unique perspective regarding online education and pedagogical frameworks (Kilburn, 2005).

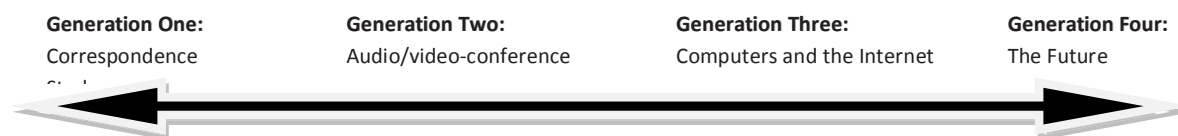
According to Forsyth (1998), “alternative methods of delivery address the changing paradigm of education and training” (p. 15). These new methods have the potential to transform learning from an old paradigm of “teaching as telling” to a new paradigm of “life-long learning.” This shift in thinking will place greater emphasis on the learner.

Distance Education Theories

Holmberg’s (1986) Guided Didactic Conversation Theory attempts to explain the effectiveness of teaching as it relates to cooperation and a sense of belonging among learners. Holmberg suggests seven background assumptions. The crux of his theory centers on the philosophy that distance education should:

“...support student motivation, promote learning pleasure and make the study relevant to the individual learner and his/her needs, create feelings of rapport between the learner and the distance-education institution, facilitate access to course content, engage the learner in activities, discussions and decisions and generally cater to helpful, real and stimulated communications to and from the learner”(p. 123).

Figure 1. Evolution of Distance Learning



Keegan's (1986) Theoretical Framework for Distance Education postulates three questions to address the development of a theory of distance education. The first question is whether distance education is an educational activity. Keegan voices concern that various forms of distance education function more on a business model rather than an educational model. His second question addresses whether or not distance education is a form of conventional education. He raises concerns that distance education is not based on person-to-person interaction and is distinctly different from oral or group-based education. His third question is the reality of distance education, in other words, if it is indeed possible to have education at a distance. Keegan theorizes that education requires a shared experience between the teacher and the learner and believes it may not be possible to make that connection when utilizing distance education. In summary, he concluded that distance instruction may be possible, but distance education is not (Keegan, 1986).

The foundational perspective describes knowledge as "something" that is transferred from one person to another. Learning is seen as a rational process or empirical study. Knowledge is something a teacher has and through teaching that "something" is transferred to the student. Educational transfers are often enhanced by the use of a textbook (e.g., transferring knowledge from the author to the reader). The interaction between students, or between students and the instructor, is not an integral part of knowledge transmission (Bruffee, 1993).

The non-foundational perspective views knowledge as a social consensus of the belief that is produced through interactions with others. In other words, knowledge is transferred through social consensus between teacher and the learner. Interaction could be seen as the conduit. Knowledge can be something that is developed through conversations and negotiations among individuals (Bruffee, 1993).

MELDING PEDAGOGY AND TECHNOLOGY

Each of the theories provides insight into how knowledge can be transferred. By providing the theoretical lenses and creating a connection with the online environment, we take the crucial step in melding pedagogy with the use of technology.

Guided Didactic Conversation

At the core of Guided Didactic Conversation Theory is the interaction between the teacher and learner. Holmberg (1996) feels that emotional involvement between teacher and learner will contribute to pleasurable learning, and as a result, student motivation. He feels that effective teaching can be witnessed in demonstrated learning. With this in mind, online courses should be structured to incorporate demonstrated learning outcomes and teacher/student interactions to support student motivation. The importance of interaction is supported by Hawisher and Pemberson's (1997) findings that the success of online courses correlates with the value instructors place on discussion. This might suggest that in order for students to effectively demonstrate learning, they need interactions and feedback from instructors and fellow students that will, in turn, motivate students. It is often a challenge for faculty to balance the content-related interactions with the more personal interactions. The more personal interactions should be designed to develop a sense of community and build relationships (Dede, 1996).

Framework for Distance Education

Looking at online learning using Keegan's framework offers additional insights into the concept of online education and its effectiveness. If an interactive form of delivery is effectively used, Keegan's concerns

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