

Chapter 2

Perception of Communication in Virtual Learning Environments: What's in It for Them?

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ABSTRACT

Perception research helps to understand how stimuli (gist) interacts with learners' sensory systems (visual, auditory, tactile). Communication in virtual learning environments is significant because when the laws of perception are manifested, the strategy should include discovering how the relationships between the instructional design process (analyze, design, develop, implement and evaluate) synthesizes learning theories and learners' experience to create effective communication in virtual instructional events, learning objectives and goals.

INTRODUCTION

United States National Center for Educational Statistics, Digest of Educational Statistics (2011) reported that by the year 2020, eighty-million, nine-hundred and fifty-five thousand learners are predicted to be enrolled in technology-based virtual learning education and training programs. According to these statistics, each day learners will either enroll themselves or be involuntarily enrolled, in virtual learning environments, for the specific purpose of learning something new. Learners' perception of written communication in virtual learning environments can be complex, if there is no strategy to support the gist of the communication or support the learning process. For practitioners who design communication in virtual learning environments, there is the tendency to focus on the task and activities to deliver the content that impacts learners' educational experiences. Even though there are still controversies over the quality of virtual learning environments, organizations that tries to hold onto the traditional class ball on the educational court are realizing that learners are departing quickly to venues that affords them the opportunity to choose the learning environment that is best for them. As more and more learners realize that promotional opportunities are tied to higher education, learners are opting to select virtual

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learning environments because of the benefits it provides. The frequent movement to virtual learning environments provides the ripe opportunity for instructional designers to, as Kahn (1997) stated, provide innovative approaches to remote audiences.

Conclusions can be drawn from the staggering numbers that learners have endorsed the idea behind the benefits of virtual learning environments, some of which are mentioned in a higher-order thinking study conducted by McLoughlin & Mynard (2009):

1. Non-intimating environment;
2. Offers flexibility to reach career and educational goals without disrupting work or personal life;
3. Equal participating in discussion forums where learners can interact with instruction and other learners on a regular basis;
4. Environment is not dominated by instructor; and,
5. Offers the opportunity to collaborate with learners who have different perspectives.

Whether the learner initiated the process, which means their endorsement had been tendered, or the learner enters the learning environment with skepticism, communication is important for the learner to understand the purpose of the learning environment. With their endorsement comes the perception that the virtual learning environment would:

1. Be what the advertisement said it will be;
2. Be just as effective as other learning environments they perceived they were successful (many times traditional); and,
3. Allow the improved skill(s) and knowledge to be utilized immediately or towards a specific goal.

In these scenario, instructional designers, who design instruction for adult learners, will design instruction for learners who are willing, skeptical, impassive and cynical. Rather than being focused *only* on task and measurable goals, in the design phase, practitioners focus must also consider how the learning environment will be communicated to instigate and ignite the learners' thirst for learning so that the desired behavior will be achieved and engagement will not be terminated by the learner, either withdrawing physically or checking out mentally.

Perception research helps to understand how stimuli (gist) interacts with learners' sensory systems (visual, auditory, tactile). Communication in virtual learning environments is significant because when the laws of perception are manifested, the strategy should include discovering how the relationships between the instructional design process (analyze, design, develop, implement and evaluate) synthesizes learning theories and learners' experience to create effective communication in virtual instructional events, objectives and goals.

Communication influences the learners' conception of what they expect, see, hear and interpret. Communication designed to motivate learners to sign up or to change behavior should not encompass contorted syntax, in the advertisement (to draw the learners), the introduction, learning goals, objectives, discussion forums or even the Syllabus. Communication should be clear so that the learners' expectations are not met with disappointment and the learning environment does not produce dysfunctional learners.

This chapter utilizes a combination of approaches: the importance of learning theories and the instructional design process; focus on the significance of designing communication that could be influential on reshaping perceptual learning; and, how that communication can trigger adult learners' interactions

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