Chapter 74
The Value of Social Presence in Developing Student Satisfaction and Learning Outcomes in Online Environments

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ABSTRACT

As humanity continues into the twenty-first century, online or distance education is emerging as a viable alternative to the learning that is occurring in traditional university-level learning environments. While there is little difference in the quality of learning and information being presented between these two methods, there are distinct differences in the interactions occurring between students and instructors. Specifically, the presence of physical geographic distance creates a feeling of isolation in the minds of the students participating in these online learning environments. This chapter examines the concept of isolation through the lens of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory, which offers an explanation for why such attitudes permeate in this method of instructing students. Moreover, by discussing the history of the medium and the importance of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory, it is possible determine the best practices and procedures for creating a feeling of social presence in online learning environments.

INTRODUCTION: THE DICHOTOMY THAT IS HIGHER EDUCATION

Online courses or face-to-face instruction? On first glance, this appears to be a simple question that is compounded by the conjunction, "or." It is a reference to a personal preference towards a particular method of delivery for educational curriculum as it conjures up the debate of quality between both online and traditional face-to-face courses. To understand the riddle posed is to comprehend the concept of student preference as it relates to how the learner best receives the information being conveyed to them from their instructor. Thus, the approach to the debate regarding academic quality between the dominant methods for delivering course materials and instructions whether it is a virtual or physical classroom

has been rendered moot. It becomes a question about how to best replicate the experiences that take place exclusively in face-to-face learning environments virtually and not one based on the preference if the participant.

After all, there have been a wealth of studies completed that have lead many to believe that online learning outcomes are the same or superior to those of its face-to-face counterparts. Specifically, one study conducted to track and compare this sentiment was the Allen and Seaman (2013) study which explained that within the context of public institutions of higher learning, roughly three-fourths of administrators surveyed felt that these outcomes are comparable. Such positive sentiment towards the medium implies that online instruction is not expected to fade away from the offerings present in a public or private post-secondary institution in the United States. If the quality of education received in either face-to-face or online instruction is ostensibly similar, why does the question posed earlier continue to persist in the minds of prospective and current college level students and other stakeholders (whether they be instructors, administrators etc.)? The answer lies inevitably in the elements, which cause online instruction and learning to be different from the methods present in face-to-face instruction. In short, the methods used for interaction between the primary stakeholders, instructors and students, is the primary driver for the effectiveness of the medium itself (Moore, 1989).

Online education has one glaring deficiency when compared to traditional instruction in that it does not have face-to-face interaction and thus, this leads to the creation of isolation in the minds of participating students in an environment where they will be less than successful. (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). An understanding of the conceptual premise of social presence is required for the creation of online courses that provide an experience that is similar to the one that takes place in a traditional face-to-face classroom. Moreover, social presence is an integral component in the creation of online learning communities, which conceivably increases the level of rapport between the primary stakeholders in the process as well as the motivation required for students to participate and complete courses online. Ultimately, to achieve social presence in higher education courses online necessitates an understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of the medium for this method of delivery as well as how learning is expected to be constructed in the minds of the students participating in courses such as these.

DEFINING DISTANCE EDUCATION: MOORE'S THEORY OF TRANSACTIONAL DISTANCE

Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance offers a context by which to understand the impact that isolation has on the process that is online learning in post-secondary learning environments. Moore (1993) explains the concept of transactional distance is that distance education should not simply be viewed as "a geographic separation" between the primary stakeholders (students and their instructors), rather, it is a "pedagogical concept" that carries several implications for online education (p. 22). In particular, distance in online education regardless of the physical distance establishes a defined chasm between the instructor and their students that must be overcome for effective learning to occur. Moore (1991) defines this separation as a transactional distance that is the "physical separation that causes a psychological and communications gap" which in turn results in the "potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner, and this referred to as the transactional distance." (p. 3)

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