Chapter XIV
Constructing Online Conversation to Support Learning

Li Jin
Kent State University, USA

Albert Ingram
Kent State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the literature of conversation in online environments, introduces the technologies that facilitate online conversation, such as e-mail, discussion board, instant messaging, chat rooms, and computer conferencing, discusses issues related to making good use of available technology to effectively construct online conversation, and gives practical suggestions and strategies for planning an Fonline course, enhancing participation, fostering learning community, encouraging knowledge construction, and controlling online conversation. Learner characteristics and needs are major factors considered through the whole process. Future trends of individualization of online conversation as the way to individualizing online learning experience are pursued. Further readings on research trends are provided as well.

INTRODUCTION

The development of online education has resulted in far-reaching changes in our society (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). We are now in the transforming phase and experiencing the impact and challenge the new media have created. Educators must pursue the ways to communicate effectively with learners online.

Online conversation, which is defined here as verbal or text based information exchange between two or more participants in an online environ-

ment, is an important form of communication and interaction in online courses. Understanding the attributes of online conversation may lead to studies of the technologies available to support online conversation and studies of the participants conducting these conversations.

The goals of conducting dialogues through online technologies are to teach and learn. Studies should focus on how to improve the teaching and learning processes. Active participation, a friendly learning community, and interactions that foster knowledge construction will enhance learning. While many technologies such as e-mail, discussion boards, instant messaging, chat rooms, and computer conferencing are good channels to facilitate conversation, a more important consideration is the way in which they are used to improve the learning experience.

The instructor plays a key role in constructing an effective conversation system in any online course. He/she is responsible for making good use of the available technology, given the content, the participants, and the situation. The instructor should be able to conduct a strategic design of the conversation process, employ purposeful moderation, and use in-time interventions and spontaneous feedback to support the conversation.

The objectives of this chapter are to review the affordances and constraints of the existing technology and provide suggestions to online course designers and instructors on how to plan for the conversation system, how to understand learner's characteristics, and how to direct, intervene, and respond to the ongoing conversation. In other words: how to foster and facilitate learning using online conversation is explored.

BACKGROUND

The online environment has changed the "speed and power of communication" (Ikenberry, 1999) and the "capacity to bridge time and space for educational purpose" (Garrison & Anderson,

2003). The conversation taking place in the online environment is a way to transmit and exchange information among participants. It can use e-mails, online postings, instant messages (IMs), chats, audio or computer conferencing, and so forth. In any online conversation there is more than one participant involved, and the verbal or text interactions taking place between student-student and student-instructor can be viewed and analyzed as forms of conversations.

Conversation plays an important role in a student's learning and the overall perception of the effectiveness of a course (Berge, 1999; Flottemesch, 2000). Palloff and Pratt (1999) concluded that the interactions among students and between the instructor and students are keys to the learning process in an online environment, because collaborative learning is supposed to result from these interactions. Jiang (1998) found that in online courses, students demonstrated higher learning achievement when online interaction was strongly emphasized. Levels of student interaction have been identified as good predictors of learning outcomes (Hay, Hodgkinson, Peltier, & Drago, 2004). Arbaugh (2000) found that the level of class environment interactivity was associated with student learning, and Noble (1998) argued that a well-designed course should include multiple assignments and activities that promote asynchronous reflection and synchronous conversation.

Many researchers have studied the structures and functions of e-mail (Clegg, Mcmanus, Smith, & Todd, 2006; Hassini, 2006; Jin, 2005), online discussion (Burge & Muilengurg, 2002; Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005; Jefferies, Grodzinsky, & Griffin, 2003; Jiang, 1998; Jin, 2005; Moore & Marra, 2005; Murphy, Mahoney, Chen, Mendoza-Diaz, & Yang, 2005; Peters, 1996), IM (Contreras-Castillo, Perez-Fragoso, & Favela, 2006; Kuyath & Winter, 2006; Nicholson, 2005), chatting (Hanna, 2002; Huffman & Whittingham, 2006; Jin, 2005; Pata & Sarapuu, 2006; Sanders, 2006), and computer conferencing (Berge, 1995; Garrison, Anderson,

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